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THE PHANTOM FORT

All that remains are some fire-blackened chimneys—an eternal monument of shame to the men the West licked.

By **W. EDMUNDS
CLAUSSEN**



THE major looked more wasted than usual in this morning's light. The men knew the night had gone badly with him. West Point put something into a man, but the desert could grind it out, along with the vitality nature stored in him.

He sat a big roan branded with Army iron, his steel-sharp eyes ranging his cavalry strung across the parade ground. Companies B and C looked the gauntest. Two fiendish weeks with the Comanches leading them a merry chase had left its mark. *This hellish country*, the major thought.

The sweltering sun sucked sweat from his forehead, and the sweat ran down, leaving two clear furrows against his alkali-dusty cheek. The crack of the swivel gun struck against the hot, breathless air, and his gauntleted hand lifted to his hatbrim. The color-sergeant was lowering Phantom's flag for the last time. *Would they ever be back? Would Washington order men to re-occupy this forsaken post?* He cleared the dust in his throat so his voice would carry.

He spoke more personally than the command recalled hearing before. "Men, the Army isn't abandoning Phantom Hill, as many of you believe. We're simply being transferred—every last Jack of us. We could be brought back next month. Or next

year. Every man among you might come back!"

He took one last sweeping look and dropped his hand. The trumpeter's *forward* pushed back the stifling air and the major pivoted his roan. The columns began to move. Under his breath the major murmured, "They'll send us back if the Comanches haven't destroyed the post. May they burn it to the ground!"

He muttered the words, as a man does when the hatred bottles too tight inside. Yet a gust of wind carried his words into the columns—that same devilish wind that kept the yellow dust above the hill and gave it its vague, barely discernible outline from the basin.

There wasn't a trooper on the hill who didn't share the major's hatred of this place. A disgruntled pair from Company C stared at each other shrewdly. Roddy said:

"You suppose that was an order?"

The captain overheard that and a stiffness ran over him. Slowly a brittle smile swept across his lips and he reined his horse beside the pair. "You heard what the Old Man said. Fall out!"

They dropped aside from the moving columns. One by one the captain picked

(Please continue on page 8)

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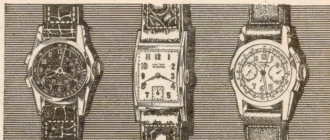
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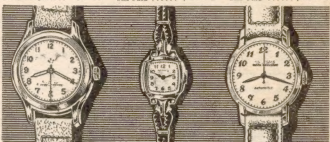
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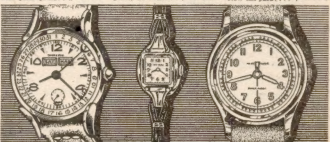
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(Continued from page 6)

men from the lines. He drew a half dozen and led them back to the fort. In a few minutes a blaze was eating its way through the stables. From building to building it leaped. Fifty of them, all new, all strong and solid against the might of the Comanche. All this while the dusty columns rode downslope, their faces pointed toward the head of the line.

The major might not have known his buildings were on fire. His feverish eyes were boring ahead. He was deeply preoccupied. Inside him was his consuming hatred of Phantom Hill. . . .

It wasn't the Comanches that licked the Army. It was the country. North-central Texas in those days was rough and raw. Fort Phantom was occupied late in 1851. It was abandoned three years later.

The Butterfield stage engineers routed their line through this part of Texas in 1857. Fifty stone chimneys rose on the site of the fort like fingers across the blue Texas sky, grim evidence of the melancholy loneliness of the place. A house remained, a powder magazine too solid to be destroyed, a stable. The engineers selected the house as stage station, the magazine for a storehouse. They built their rock corral for the Overland mules, dug out the well.

Butterfield's Overland Mail was the longest stage route in the history of the West. Two-thousand, eight hundred miles from St. Louis to San Francisco—by way of the Mexican border! Men laughed at the audacity of Butterfield to affix his name to a contract calling for a 25-day mail schedule to California. As a result, only one newspaper was on hand to record the first East-West departure. The New York *Herald* sent Waterman L. Ormsby over the entire trip as special correspondent.

Ormsby reached Phantom the night of September 23, 1858. He wrote for the *Herald*:

"After being occupied for some time

(Phantom Hill) was destroyed by fire by the soldiers in 1853 on occasion of their being ordered to some other post. Over half a million dollars worth of property was destroyed at the time; yet after a pretended investigation, no conclusion was arrived at as to the cause of the diabolical deed. . . . Most of the chimneys are still standing, and as they reflected the light of a full moon as we drove up, might well become the title of 'Phantom Hill'."

Ormsby described a fine well eighty feet deep and twenty in diameter, containing seventeen feet of water. He took particular delight in the fact that the station agent, an elderly man named Burlington, was not afraid to stay here alone with his wife—"as brave a man as ever settled on the frontier, and a monument of shame to the cowardly soldiers who burned the post."

They told me at Phantom Hill a few years ago that the well was 128 feet deep, lined with timber as it went down. It is no longer in use. Something in the soil caused the effect of petrification on its timber, and long ago this was dug up for some different purpose. They have used the planks, in lieu of granite, as tombstones in the old cemetery!

The powder magazine is still here, pointed out as a part of the Overland Mail buildings. The chimneys remain much as Ormsby saw them. They rise from a broad, mesquite-covered plain. Cattle graze on the stubble of grass that grows over the old parade ground. There is something macabre in the scene.

You cannot stand and gaze at those rock chimneys without asking yourself questions. Who was it burned down the post: soldiers actually returning for this evil purpose? Comanches after the troopers had withdrawn? Your mind gropes with its problem. Yet on this point Ormsby was quite definite:

"Two things are very certain; first, that the soldiers did not like the place; and second, that whether accidentally or not, it burned down just as they left it."

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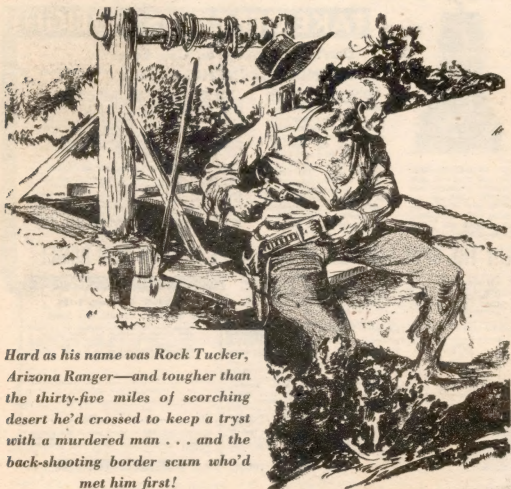
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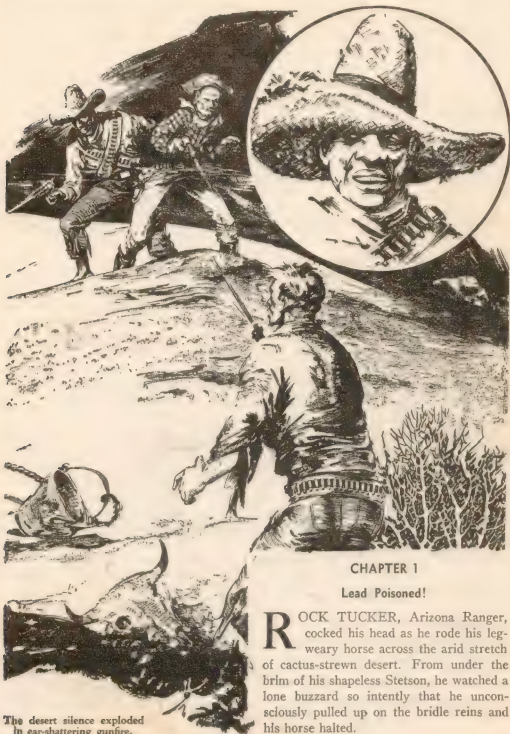
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DEATH WATCH AT BITTER SPRINGS

By WALT COBURN



Hard as his name was Rock Tucker, Arizona Ranger—and tougher than the thirty-five miles of scorching desert he'd crossed to keep a tryst with a murdered man . . . and the back-shooting border scum who'd met him first!



The desert silence exploded
in ear-shattering gunfire.

CHAPTER 1

Lead Poisoned!

ROCK TUCKER, Arizona Ranger, cocked his head as he rode his leg-weary horse across the arid stretch of cactus-strewn desert. From under the brim of his shapeless Stetson, he watched a lone buzzard so intently that he unconsciously pulled up on the bridle reins and his horse halted.

The buzzard was no more than a tiny dot of black, at first, against the cloudless, pale blue Arizona-Mexico sky. The dot gradually became larger and took shape, and he could make out the lazy, flapping wings and the ugly blood-red head. The buzzard sighted the man on horseback and winged lower, soaring in a wide circle. The scavenger bird of the desert, the harbinger of death in the wastelands of the Southwest.

The heat of the brassy sun was merciless, but a thin shiver ran down the man's spine. His right hand slid down the butt of the six-shooter he wore in an open holster. When his fingers gripped the gun butt, it felt hot as a branding iron. His hand came away from the gun and doubled into a hard fist. He shook his fist at the buzzard and nudged his horse with the spurs.

"Fooled you that time, you ugly buzzard!" Rock Tucker croaked, and his sun-cracked lips spread in a flat mirthless grin.

At the first movement of man and horse, the buzzard's wings flapped and the bird circled once and then took off, resuming its direct course of flight southward toward the Mexican border. The buzzard was headed straight for the Bitter Springs Well, a scant five miles distant. It was the only water hole between the thirsty miles of desert behind Rock Tucker and the Whetlocks that marked the Mexican line, ten miles beyond the Bitter Springs Well.

Rock Tucker twisted his head and looked skyward again. He made out more black dots in the pale turquoise sky. Other buzzards were winging their way across the desert, headed for Bitter Springs Well.

The flat grin on Rock Tucker's face died, and a look of dread and fear crept into his puckered gray eyes.

"Mebby I was only foolin' myself, you damn buzzard. Might be you were right. If that Bitter Springs Well has dried up, I may be a dead man mighty soon."

Rock Tucker was thirty years old, a six-footer. He was rawboned, and his muscles were hard and tough as rawhide. His

leathery face was marred by dusty black stubble a week old; his wiry black hair was matted with sweat. Born and raised along the Mexican border with its bare grim mountains, its stretches of waterless desert, he knew what it meant to die the slow torturing death of thirst. He'd had a few close calls. He'd ridden up on men dying or dead of thirst. And he'd heard strange, gruesome talk about men crazed by the heat and thirst.

Rock Tucker was a cowhand and a cowman in his own right, with his own brand and a little home ranch back yonder. He was one of a dozen carefully hand-picked men the captain of the Arizona Rangers had chosen for a commission in that tough, fearless little band of law-enforcement officers. Rock Tucker was a brave man. Brave sometimes to the point where bravery overstepped the line of foolhardiness. But Rock Tucker was not immune to that dread fear of dying the slow death of thirst while the merciless sun beat down to cook a man's skull.

The stout line-backed dun gelding he forked lifted its head, ears cocked forward, smelling water. Rock Tucker's grin returned as the horse quickened his pace. There was water at the Bitter Springs Well.

"It's bitter water," Rock Tucker muttered, "but she smells shore sweet, pony." He licked his sun-cracked lips.

The flock of buzzards was there before him when he reached the Bitter Springs Well. Some were on the ground, walking with that clumsy, awkward buzzard gait. Others were wheeling, soaring downward in slow spirals.

A GROWTH of mesquite and palo verde grew green around Bitter Springs Well. It was a boxed-in spring with an old plank trough to siphon off the overflow. From a creaky wooden windlass, an old wooden bucket hung by a saddle rope. The water had a bitter taste like quinine and soda, but it was harmless unless a man

drank too much. The Yaquis and Mexicans claimed the bitter taste helped quench thirst far more effectively than clear water.

Rock Tucker slid his six-shooter from its holster. The sight of those buzzards sickened him. He thumbed back the gun hammer and pulled the trigger. The shot sounded cannon-loud as it shattered the desert silence. Through the gun echoes the buzzards' wings made a whispering noise, as if the dead man lying there fifty feet from the well had whispered a prayer of thanks.

A sudden rattle and thud of hoofs in the scrub mesquite startled the ranger, and he thumbed back the gun hammer.

Then the flat grin twisted his face, and he slowly eased the gun hammer down. It was only a little bunch of wild burros in the mesquite. Startled by the shot, they stampeded in alarm, circling and bucking, and then stood facing the man on horseback, their long furry ears erect.

There was something ludicrous, comical about the animal. The hardness in the man's gray eyes softened.

"Come on back, burros. Finish out your siesta. I mean you no harm."

He rode over to where the dead man lay and stared down from his saddle. The hardness came back into his eyes and his heavy black brows knit in a scowl. He slowly pulled his hat off his head and spoke grimly to the dead man.

"Well, that's that, Fred. When a man tries to play his game thataway, both ends agin the middle, the odds come too big. Sooner or later, Fred, you was bound to pull up lame. . . . I'll tend to your dead carcass directly me'n my pony is watered."

He rode slowly to the boxed-in well and swung from the saddle.

It was an unwritten law here at the Bitter Springs Well that when a man had drunk his fill and watered his horse, he should lower the big wooden bucket back into the water, to keep the sun from warping it. But the bucket now lay on the ground. It had not been there in the sun

long enough for the wooden staves to warp and crack apart, but as Rock Tucker lifted the bucket he saw crude lettering on it:

Poisoned!

Rock Tucker, Arizona Ranger, stared squint-eyed at that one word of grim warning. Then he looked at the dead body of Fred Farwell, renegade, border-jumper, traitor to his own cattle-rustling kind. Fred Farwell, the man whom Tucker had crossed thirty-five miles of hot desert to meet here at Bitter Springs Well.

"Poisoned!" Rock Tucker whispered.

The line-backed dun was nudging Rock's back, begging for water.

"I'm as dry as you are, pony, but we gotta play 'er safe. We'll have a look around first."

The water level in the well was about three feet below the plank box, but the wooden spillway poured a little stream to a gouged-out water hole along one side. From the tracks around the muddy hole, the wild burros had been watering there. He searched for carcasses of burros who might have drunk the poisoned water and died, but he found none.

There was only the dead body of the renegade Fred Farwell. Rock Tucker walked over to the dead man. He took hold of a spurred boot and rolled him over. He frowned as he squatted there on his boot-heels.

"Why didn't you tell a man, Fred?" he muttered. "You didn't die of poisoned water. You were shot in the back!"

He walked back to the well, leading his horse, waving his free arm to scare off the circling buzzards.

He lowered the wooden bucket deep into the well and let the water soak off the sun heat. Then he cranked it to the surface. He let his horse drink first. Only when the horse had drunk did the man lower the bucket and draw it up to quench his own thirst.

He rinsed his mouth out first and spat

the water out on the ground. He took little sips of the bitter water, swallowing slowly, washing the dryness from his gullet. He'd taken the bucket away from his horse before the gelding had drunk too much. He lowered the bucket into the well, his thirst not half quenched.

"We'll wait a little while, pony."

Unless a big amount of strychnine had been dumped into the well, the fresh water seeping in from the spring below and the spillover going out the trough would have diluted the poison enough by now so that it wouldn't likely kill a man or his horse.

Rock Tucker timed it by the big silver watch he kept in the pocket of his old Levi overalls. Half an hour. The horse was nibbling at the salt grass. Rock felt no cramps as he threw mud clods at the buzzards and found a short-handled shovel to dig a grave. The wild burros were drinking from their water hole, with no apparent ill effect.

"I reckon, pony," he said when the half hour was up, "it's second drink time."

This time the man and horse drank a little more of the bitter water. Somehow the taste of it in Rock's mouth was not quite so bitter.

"Goes to show, pony, a man's imagination kin play him tricks."

He unsaddled and pulled off the bridle and let the line-backed dun roll. Then he set to work digging a grave in the sand. When he climbed out of the open hole, he was dripping sweat and the brassy sun had set behind the broken skyline.

When the evening star appeared, Rock Tucker paused to look at it and make his wish. That was a throwback to his early boyhood that he'd never quite forgotten and always remembered when he was alone in the big silence of the Southwest deserts. It was a silence that was an integral part of the man. It was reflected in him always and made him chary of words.

Wishing on the evening star was a sort of prayer. His lips never moved, but the words were inside his heart, his heart and

his eyes looking up at the bright star. The memories all came flooding back within the man as he stood, bareheaded, the evening breeze cooling him, drying the sweat on his faded blue shirt.

"Just this last job. Only one last chore, and I'm all done," Rock Tucker said silently. "Then I turn in my commission in the Arizona Rangers and I'm free. Free, then, to ask that fool question I've kept corked up inside. I'll git my ugly chores done, Molly. Then, providin' I got the nerve, I'll ask you. . . ."

Then his eyes slivered, and he turned away and headed for the dead body of Fred Farwell.

"Or mebbly," he said aloud, "mebbly I'll just ride yonderly. Plumb outa the country. Because most probably you'll never take my word for it. When I tell you, Molly, that I didn't kill your brother Fred."

CHAPTER 2

A Man Called Curro Burro

THE pockets of the dead man's old Levi overalls had been turned inside out. A dirty money belt lay nearby, the glove snaps on the money pouches open. Robbed of whatever they contained, and discarded. That saved Rock Tucker the grisly job of searching the corpse.

He dug the grave and dumped the body into it. Not even an old tarp to shroud it, no pine-board coffin. It was like burying some dead animal. Rock shoved in the loose sand and tamped it down. He worked with almost feverish haste to get the job done and over with.

When he had finally finished, he washed at the well.

His bare foot stepped on something hard, and he picked up a brass cartridge from where it lay on the ground. It was a .44 caliber cartridge and it had not been fired. Its soft lead had been used to mark the *Poisoned* sign on the big wooden bucket.

Rock Tucker shoved the cartridge into his pocket.

The dead body of Fred Farwell had been robbed of its filled cartridge belt and six-shooter. His horse and saddle had been stolen. Guns and saddles and a good horse were of value along the Mexican border.

Rock Tucker had fetched along, in muslin sacks, a pound of coffee beans, some jerky, and a pound of salt. He found an old blackened lard pail that had been used before and scoured it with sand and washed it clean. He pounded a handful of coffee beans with the barrel of his six-shooter. He risked kindling a little fire of dried mesquite to make the coffee. When it had simmered a long time, he drank it and ate some dry jerky. The coffee tasted bitter as boiled quinine.

The gelding grazed with the wild burros. It was sorry grazing. A horse had to be hungry before it would tackle the rank salt grass and the few mesquite beans that grew beyond the reach of the small burros. The buzzards, cheated out of their carrion, roosted in the scrub mesquite and palo verde branches, making ugly black blotches against the star-filled sky.

Rock Tucker carried his gear into the scrub mesquite. He spread the saddle blanket and laid his saddle carbine and gun-belt alongside it. With his head pillowed on his hard saddle, he lay back, smoking a last cigarette. Then he stubbed out the cigarette and tried to get some sleep.

But the bitter coffee and dry jerky did not set good, and the cigarette could not take the bitter taste out of his mouth. He lay on his back, watching the stars. The moon climbed higher in the sky.

As near as he could figure it, Fred Farwell had been shot in the back sometime last night. Rock had cut for sign and found the tracks of three horses. One of those horses had been ridden by Fred Farwell. The boot tracks were harder to read because the sandy ground was too soft. Either the other two renegades had come with the

luckless Fred, or they had followed him.

Fred had been told to come alone for his secret rendezvous with Rock Tucker. The ranger recalled the exact words he had spoken when he had talked to Fred through the bars of Fred's jail cell.

"I've got enough on you, Fred, to send you to the Yuma pen for anyhow fifteen years. Cattle rustlin' and horse stealin'."

"You wouldn't do that to me, Rock." Fred was in his middle twenties. Tall, slim, red headed, freckled, with buck teeth and a weak jaw. His green eyes were shifty. "I'm Molly's brother."

"Leave Molly out of it. You've dealt her enough misery without tryin' to hide behind her petticoats. You've gambled away the cow outfit your father left you both when he died. You've spent her share of the money across the bar and on honkatonk girls. There ain't a payday but what you show up with a hard-luck tale and she gives you half her schoolmarm's wages. You're a shore sorry burden for her to carry through life. The sooner you're killed off the better. I'd be doin' Molly a favor if I shot you."

"I'll tell Molly what you said, Rock."

"I don't give a damn what you tell her. Looks like you're Yuma bound. With a one-way ticket."

"I'll make a dicker with you, Rock." Fred's green eyes were crafty. He grinned slyly and he lowered his voice.

"Them few head of Mexican cattle we fetched across the line and the small bunches of horses we shoved across the border—hell, that's no more than chicken feed. It's all a blind to cover up somethin' bigger. Me and the few two-bit renegades with me don't count. The bounty on all our hides wouldn't pay a man for a one night drunk. While me and the sorry things with me was shovin' them little drives of long-horned Mexican dogies through the Dos Cabezas Pass, we was decoyin' the Border Patrol. We was paid to draw them law boys off, to take our chances on gittin' ketched.

"If my horse hadn't thrown a shoe and gone lame in the rocks, the Border Patrol would never have ketched me. I'd have got away with the others—leavin' the Border Patrol with that sorry bunch of Mexican longhorn dogies. And I'd be laughin' like hell with the rest of 'em on the Mexican side of the line. We was decoys, nothin' more or less. Damned decoys on horseback. You believe me, Rock?" He had a whining voice that Rock had no trouble recalling now, after the man was dead and buried.

"Keep on talking, Fred. You might say something that don't sound like a damned lie."

"Give me one last chance, Rock, and I'll prove it to you. While we was decoyin' the Border Patrol into Dos Cabezos Pass, Carlos Kemp and his son, Barnabas, was travelin' light with one fast bed-mule. The tarp-covered pack on the mule was shore lightweight. The contraband they was fetchin' up out of Mexico was so light a man could pack it all in a knapsack strapped on his back, and it wouldn't bend his back. Dope. Opium, morphine. In airtight sealed cans. Five, ten, twenty-five thousand dollars' worth to a load."

FRED'S whine was no more than a whisper. His lean face was glistening with cold sweat. "They'd kill me for what I just spilled to you, Rock."

"Any man kin lie, Fred."

"Turn me loose, Rock, and I'll prove I ain't. There's a full moon on the thirteenth. That's Friday, next week. Friday the thirteenth could be bad luck for Carlos Kemp and his son Barnabas. If you'll meet me the evenin' of the thirteenth at Bitter Springs Well, on the Devil's Highway, I'll show up alone. We'll set the gun trap for the Kemps."

"Bitter Springs Well. You come alone, I'll show up alone." Rock Tucker had told Fred Farwell. "It's a deal."

Tonight Rock had found one large boot-

print there in the sand. Carlos Kemp was a huge man. It took a number twelve boot, wide, low heeled, flat footed, to carry his three hundred pounds of big meat.

Barnabas, his son, was nearly as large. He wore a long narrow boot with high heels. And Rock Tucker had seen the print of Barnabas' boot, too, at the water hole where the wild burros watered.

That told the tale, as far as Rock Tucker, Arizona Ranger, was concerned.

Carlos Kemp and his son Barnabas owned a string of saloons and gambling houses across the Mexican line from Yuma. But with the election of the new Presidente of Mexico, things had gone rough for the two Kemps. Gambling had been stopped. Mexico enforced that anti-gambling law at gun-point.

Carlos Kemp and his son Barnabas had watched with a jaundiced eye while the Mexican Law padlocked the doors of their gambling joints, for it meant losing the bulk of their revenue. The liquor they sold was only a drop in their bucket.

Back in the old days of Pancho Villa, Carlos Kemp had made his start, running guns and ammunition to the Pancho Villa revolutionists. Carlos had sat back in his easy chair at El Paso while his men took the risks. He had agents buy the guns and ammunition and he had other agents in Mexico to handle the sales. Carlos sat back and ate tremendous meals and washed the grub down with gallons of beer. Between meals Carlos Kemp was a two-bottle man and he carried his liquor well.

Carlos married an entertainer at a Juarez cabaret and cantina. She was tall, statuesque, exotically beautiful. Her skin was as smooth as old ivory. She had full red lips, a finely chiseled nose, thick, blue-black hair that came below her waist when she shook it free and sang her songs in a sultry, deep-toned voice.

She died soon after she gave birth to her only child. Barnabas Kemp.

If ever Carlos Kemp was capable of any

such soft sentiment as love, he gave it to his wife. And along the border, they said that all the good and decency inside Carlos Kemp was buried in her grave.

Carlos could not bear to look at his newborn son. He would have strangled the baby or tried to dash his brains out, if the hospital authorities hadn't taken the baby and kept it hidden.

There for several years big Carlos Kemp went loco. He swilled down tequila and mescal and raw whiskey, chasing the hard liquor down with beer. While his short thick fingers rolled a mixture of marijuana and tobacco in the black cigarette papers he carried. Crossed in any way, he would turn into a maniac. He drank only in the saloons he owned, and on one of his mad drunks he would smash tables and chairs and every glass in the joint, until he stood alone in the midst of his own destruction.

IT WAS after one of those nightmarish drunks that he blinked open his blood-shot eyes and saw the tall, rawboned, sixteen-year-old standing over him with a quart of tequila in one hand and a short-barreled belly gun in the other. He looked down at Carlos, grinning faintly, with eyes that were the same almost colorless blue as Carlos Kemp's eyes.

"Which will it be, Father?" Barnabas Kemp had a soft, purring voice. "Tequila—or a bullet between your eyes!"

Carlos slowly got to his feet and stood with his huge legs braced wide apart. For a long moment father and son eyed one another.

"Tequila. If you're man enough to take drink for drink."

"I'm man enough," Barnabas Kemp said in his husky voice. . . .

Now Rock Tucker waited here at Bitter Springs Well for Carlos Kemp and his son Barnabas, wondering if they would return.

And as near as Rock Tucker could figure it out, Barnabas Kemp would be almost thirty years old. Big, tough, ruthless, as

merciless and cold blooded as ever his father Carlos had been in his prime, with the same shrewd cunning and treachery in his brain.

But Rock Tucker, Arizona Ranger, held but small hopes of the two Kemps showing up here. They had stopped here last night with their pack mule of contraband. Perhaps they had ridden up on Fred Farwell, who had no business being here at Bitter Springs Well a day early. They had shot him and left his dead carcass for the buzzards. One of the two Kemps had taken a .44 cartridge from his belt and with its gun lead had deeply lettered the word *Poisoned* on the wooden water bucket.

Then the two Kemps had ridden on with their pack mule laden with the contraband. Come daylight, Rock Tucker would find their tracks along El Camino Diablo.

Rock Tucker finally closed his eyes and dropped off to sleep.

He came awake with a sudden start, sitting bolt upright, his six-shooter in his hand. The loud din was hideous as it shattered the silence of the desert night. Then he placed the loud, raucous sound. He had been rudely awakened by the hee-haw braying of the wild burros.

They seemed all to be braying at the same time. And then the loud, discordant braying died away, and he heard the strumming of a guitar and a plaintive voice singing some Mexican song. It was a song Rock Tucker had never heard before.

No little ranchero song. No plaintive love song. It concerned the little long-eared beast of burden called the donkey. The little burro. Extolling his many virtues, stressing the few points of his beauty, and passing off his faults as his delicious sense of humor. For according to the song, the much-maligned burro was the court jester of the animal kingdom, who laughed at the other beasts and at the humans who did not understand his disguised cleverness.

Rock Tucker pulled on his boots, buckled on his cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter. Crouched there in the mesquite, he

gripped his saddle gun. Then as he watched he beheld a strange sight.

A Mexican on the largest pinto burro Rock had ever seen rode slowly up in the moonlight. He rode bareback, without so much as a rope or hackamore on the burro. He was strumming a battered old guitar and singing the strange song in a soft voice that had sadness in it, and wry wisdom, and finally a hidden chuckle. And behind him, in a comical procession, trailed all the wild burros.

The song quickened and grew rollicking as the burro and its rider came up to the well. Finally the Mexican's head tilted back under his old sombrero, and the song ended on a final, raucous "Hee-haw!"

The large pinto burro stopped in its tracks and lifted its long-eared head toward the full moon. Mouth open, sides heaving, the burro brayed loudly. And all the wild burros stopped and brayed too. The jacks, the jennies, even the tiny colt burros, all tracked and brayed, and the braying chorus lifted skyward in a discordant din.

Even Rock Tucker's line-backed gelding joined the throng and, as if not to be outdone, nickered loudly.

After the silence where grim death had hovered like an unseen ghost, this spectacle attained the height of ludicrousness. Rock Tucker forgot the gun in his hands. First he grinned and then he laughed.

The Mexican slid off onto the ground as the braying ceased and its blatant echoes died in the silence. He was a picturesque sight. His huge straw sombrero was cocked at a rakish angle on his head, and his linen pants flared out ankle-high above the brown bare feet in homemade rawhide huaraches. Bandoliers filled with cartridges crossed the barrel chest and thick muscular shoulders. A faded crimson sash held up his pants and a machete in a leather sheath, and a short-barreled cavalry carbine hung by its strap across his broad back. To top it off, he was a short dwarfish man less than five feet high.

When the muscular little Mexican lifted

his face to the moonlight, Rock saw he was wide of mouth, with beetling black brows and opaque black eyes crinkled at the corners. His mouth was humorous, and his grin reached his eyes, squinting them to slivers.

For a long moment he stood there, and then he spoke and his voice was as deep and soft as muted old Spanish bell.

"Señor! Amigo!"

He was looking into the mesquite where Rock Tucker stood tracked. Rock Tucker gave answer.

"Señor! Amigo!" Rock stepped out from behind the scrub mesquite and into the moonlight. He walked slowly, his saddle gun cradled in his left arm.

"Señor Rock Tucker." The Mexican pulled off his big straw sombrero and bowed, his hat brim sweeping the sand.

"You have the advantage of me." Rock Tucker spoke the Mexican language like a native. He lifted his battered Stetson. "I cannot call you by name."

"I am Curro Burro." He put the straw sombrero back on his grizzled black thatch. "I have no other name. My memory goes no further back than my early childhood, when I was suckled by a she-burro. She was the only mother I can remember. There were many wild burros, and I grazed on what they found for fodder, mesquite beans and grass that was young and tender, and I grazed on all fours like a burro grazes. Until I was found by one of the good padres who followed the trail across the unknown. I was baptized at the Mission and given the baptismal name of Francisco—for Saint Francis of Assisi who spoke the language of the birds and beasts. And then Francisco was shortened to the nickname of Curro. I am Curro Burro." He tilted back his big straw sombrero and slowly his smile faded.

"But you do not laugh, señor. You do not find the name Curro Burro something ludicrous to make you laugh. I am indeed a ludicrous dwarfish specimen of a human being—but I see no hidden laughter when

I look into your face." And Curro Burro smiled.

"No." Rock Tucker smiled back. "I smile only when you smile. Perhaps sometime you will again sing your song of the burro. There is much philosophy in it."

"I am a buffoon. A clown. A jester."

"It takes a wise and clever man to become a jester. One who can stand aside and view the follies and the weaknesses of mankind."

"You speak strangely, *señor*, for the man you are supposed to be. A vaquero cowboy and an Arizona Ranger on a manhunt."

"I have read many books when I had time to read. Every book I could get hold of I read, including a Bible that was left at the ranch."

CURRO BURRO laid aside his battered guitar and reached for the wooden handle that cranked the well windlass. The windlass creaked as he raised the bucket full of water. He set it on the ground for the pinto burro to drink. His sharp eyes read the crudely printed word *Poisoned* on the wet wooden bucket. When he looked up at Rock Tucker, his opaque black eyes glistened.

"Carlos Kemp," Curro Burro said harshly. "His son Barnabas Kemp." He spat out the two names.

"Lower than the lowest. Dregs of the foulest scum of the border. Murderers. Crooked gamblers. Sellers of vile liquor to soften brave men for the kill. Peddlers of marijuana to destroy clean honest men."

"Madre de Dios, Señor Rock Tucker, quick death for such as Carlos and Barnabas Kemp is far too easy. Only slow and painful torture would be just punishment for those two evil, depraved things."

The face of the dwarfed Mexican Curro Burro was white, the opaque black eyes glowing red as burning coals.

His arms lifted skyward and his fists knotted until the knuckles showed white. Then tears, scalding hot, dampened the red

coals of his eyes. He spoke thickly, a croaking whisper:

"*Magdalena!*"

Carlos Kemp had married a woman called Magdalena. But understanding whom Curro Burro meant, Rock Tucker understood not at all the meaning the dwarfed Mexican put into the name. Whether it was hate or love that the name Magdalena conjured up out of the long past, Rock Tucker had no way of knowing.

Rock wanted to turn away. It is a terrible and terrifying spectacle to watch a man lay bare his soul.

But he stood there in his spurred boots, unable to move. He stood tense and holding his breath, and he could not tear away his eyes.

Then Curro Burro's muscular arms lowered, and he crossed himself slowly as his lips moved in some sort of silent prayer.

The wild burros and the big pinto burro minced off, their tiny hooves making a soft whisper in the sand. The line-backed dun gelding followed the burros until they were lost in the black shadows of the scrub mesquite.

The two men were left standing beside the well.

"You buried the man they killed," Curro Burro said quietly. "His name was Fred Farwell. But you know that."

"I buried Fred Farwell, yes," Rock Tucker said quietly.

"He was to be pitied more than to be blamed. The burden of guilt lies on Carlos Kemp and his evil son Barnabas. Perhaps it is better that the man was killed. His life could hold no faint ray of the sunlight of happiness and peace. The *Señor Dios* is wise."

The Mexican's eyes were warm with understanding as he smiled slowly.

"You are freed now of the burden of obligation to her brother. The love Molly Farwell had for her weak brother Fred is beyond all human understanding. But God knows and understands."

"You are free now, *Señor* Rock Tucker. Free to speak of that love for a good woman that has been locked secretly inside your heart. I am not prying into your inner life. I only want you to understand that I know, my friend."

"But how? I never let anybody on earth know. Not even Molly Farwell. How can you know, *amigo*?"

"I know many things. It is my business to know many things."

Then he said grimly, "Together we will await the return of that evil father and son."

CHAPTER 3

Deadly Jokes

A STRANGE man, indeed, this dwarfish Mexican who called himself Curro Burro. He stood there in the moonlight and the wild burros gathered around him. Wild, untamed animals with soft eyes, looking at the little Mexican, nuzzling him, cocking long furry ears forward to listen to his smallest whisper. He would scratch behind their ears, and his low-voiced words were unintelligible to Rock Tucker.

And Rock watched his gelding come up with the burros. The dun was a one-man horse, broken and gentled by Rock, and he'd never let another man handle him. Now the one-man horse was nuzzling Curro Burro, nibbling gently at his face and shock of iron-gray hair. Then the Mexican dwarf took a handful of mane and his bowed legs gave a leap, and he was straddle of the dun's back. He sat there, grinning at Rock Tucker, who stood slack-jawed, speechless. Then he swung a leg over and landed lightly on the ground.

"Animals are not afraid of me. They all trust me because I speak the language of all animals. Even the lobo wolves and the coyotes come to me when I call. I can call the birds from the air." Curro Burro smiled.

"You do not like those buzzards roosting yonder in the mesquite?"

"I hate buzzards," said Rock Tucker. "They are filthy scavenger birds, Curro."

"But necessary. You may not like them, but they have their purpose. Buzzards, they are necessary things, placed on this earth by a wise and understanding God. All things on earth are useful and fit into the pattern. Even Carlos Kemp and his son Barnabas."

Curro Burro's black eyes held a twinkle. "Behold me, *amigo*. You see an ugly misshapen dwarf with the face of a monkey. But when I gaze upon that foul Carlos Kemp and his son Barnabas, I feel myself grow in stature until I am the tallest and handsomest caballero on earth." Curro Burro chuckled.

"If for no other purpose than that, Carlos and Barnabas Kemp have their purpose on earth." The Mexican dwarf shook his head. "I shall miss that evil pair when they are dead."

Rock Tucker smiled faintly. Curro Burro pulled up a bucket of water and drank. He pointed to the *Poisoned* warning.

"That is the handiwork of Barnabas. His idea of a joke. I was here. I followed the pair on foot when they trailed Fred Farwell here.

"They suspected the renegade Fred of treachery. The Border Patrol riders had picked Fred up when his horse went lame and had jailed him, but someone unlocked his jail door and set him free. One of his fellow renegades was supposed to have freed Fred Farwell. Certainly. Who else would want to turn that renegade loose? But it was you, wasn't it?"

"And Fred Farwell crossed the border into Mexico. When he showed up at the cantina, Carlos and Barnabas Kemp feigned surprise. They got the renegade Fred drunk and left him there in the company of one of their percentage girls, who danced with him and flattered him and got the fool to bragging how brave he was, and how cun-

ing and clever. And the foolish drunken Fred Farwell told her how he and an Arizona Ranger named Rock Tucker were setting a law trap for Carlos and Barnabas Kemp at Bitter Springs Well.

"The woman told the Kemps, and after Fred Farwell left the cantina, they trailed him in the night to Bitter Springs Well. The pitiful girl with her painted lips told it to me, with tears of misery and regret in her eyes. She came to me, Curro Burro, with her confession of treachery.

"Perhaps I could have prevented the death of that renegade Fred Farwell. Perhaps not. A man has to weigh his problems on his own scales. And I had other, larger plans, more important than the saving of that renegade's worthless life. Anyhow it would only have been a postponement, because Fred Farwell was too deeply sunk in his thievery and murderous killing. So Fred Farwell, if his life had been spared, would go back to his treachery and killing,

and in the end, given the chance, he would have killed you, Rock Tucker.

"And so I let the renegade die, and perhaps in doing what I did the gallows was cheated, or the firing squad in Mexico.

"I heard the two shots that killed Fred Farwell. The Kemps shot him in the back and robbed his dead body. After that, they fouled the water here at Bitter Springs Well."

"You mean, Curro, they actually poisoned the well?"

"Had you arrived earlier in the day and drunk your fill of water, you would have been taken sick."

"And died," said Rock Tucker.

"No," grinned Curro Burro. "Just sick."

He walked off about a hundred feet and squatted on his hunkers and began digging. He dug up two white muslin sacks and shook the loose sand off them. On each white muslin sack was printed *Epsom Salts. 5 Pounds.*



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THE Mexican said, "They dumped ten pounds of epsom salts into the well. One of the Kemps' practical jokes. Usually when Barnabas plays one of his practical jokes it is far more painful, and more often than not, fatal. Many peons have died because of his jokes, and no one has dared help them but me. I have put more than one victim of Barnabas's torture to a merciful end.

"I alone, Curro Burro, the Kemps do not dare to lay a hand on. I am the only person on earth they dare not harm. Curro Burro is free. He comes and goes and nobody harms him. Carlos Kemp and his vile son Barnabas hate me as they hate no other man. But they dare not harm me in any way."

Curro Burro paused. "I am waiting for you to question me, to ask me why." The Mexican dwarf's wide mouth stretched in a grin that left his opaque black eyes cold.

Rock Tucker shook his head. "If you wanted me to know why, you would tell me, Curro," he said quietly. "I seek no man's confidence."

They sat there squatted on the ground. Curro picked up his battered old guitar. His big straw sombrero was tilted back on his head, and there was a strange faraway look in his eyes as he glanced up at the round moon that rode the desert sky. Curro needed the soft strumming of the guitar while he conjured up memories out of his past. To soften the bitter ache in his heart and the memory of the hopeless, futile young dreams that had been the misshapen dwarf Curro Burro. Hopeless dreams hidden inside, and told now for the first time to any man.

"I am ageless," Curro Burro said softly, "but once I had youth. I was young when Carlos Kemp was young. The good padres found me among the burros and took me to the mission. They taught me to read and write, and reared me according to their lights. I outgrew my boyhood there and my youth. I was going to become a Fran-

ciscan monk, wearing the brown cowled robes of their order and taking vows of chastity and poverty.

"Then I met a woman called Magdalena, named for Mary Magdalena who washed the feet of Christ and dried them with her beautiful hair. It was by chance that I saw her at Juarez, across the Rio Grande from El Paso. At a cantina where I had gone, perhaps to put my body and soul to test against worldly temptations, before I took holy orders.

"This girl Magdalena was young and beautiful as she strummed this guitar I now hold, and she sang to me alone. And when the song was done she came over and sat at my table and reached over and took my hand.

"There was no look of revulsion in her eyes, no turning away with a shudder of disgust at the hideous sight of me. There was no pity, either, in her eyes, that were deep dark pools of light.

"You are beautiful," Magdalena told me.

"I thought I was dreaming, imagining the words she had spoken.

"I am a hideous ugly dwarf," I heard my voice telling her.

"Who are you, my beautiful one?" Magdalena said. "What are you called?"

"I am Curro Burro. I was suckled by a wild burro. A good padre found me and took me away from the burros. I am going to become a Franciscan monk," I told her with the naive frankness of a boy.

"I am Magdalena. You must not renounce the world. This very night you and I will run away together and leave all this sinful world behind us. You will take me far into the hills where you came from. We will return to your wild burros, and there, together, you and I, will find our happiness. We will go first to the padres and obtain their blessing and they will sanctify our union. Your love for me is in your eyes and I love you, Curro Burro."

Curro Burro's voice went silent in the

night. It was a lengthy silence that Rock Tucker dared not break. When the Mexican dwarf broke that silence his voice was bitter, harsh, venomous.

"Those cantina walls had ears that night, *compadre*, and they were the pointed ears of the devil in hell. Magdalena left my table to finish her song and I stepped outside for fresh air. I was seized from behind and beaten senseless. I awoke in a pitch-dark dungeon, a foul place. There I stayed a prisoner, weeks, months, perhaps a year, locked in that black cell. The rats were the only companionship I had during my imprisonment.

"Then the cell door opened and I was freed. I walked into the light of day. My eyes were blinded by daylight. Someone shoved this guitar into my hands. It was the guitar that belonged to Magdalena.

"Carlos Kemp had forced her into marriage on the promise that he would spare my life. She bore him a son named Barnabas and she died in childbirth.

"Magdalena exacted some sort of oath from Carlos while she was dying. That much I know. Many times when I was back in the hills with the wild burros, her vision came again and again into my dreams. She talked to me with silent words, telling me that Carlos Kemp was bound by that oath to fear me, as Satan fears holy water. Carlos and his evil son Barnabas fear Curro Burro because of Magdalena's dying oath. They fear that it lies within my power to destroy them both. And before the sun rises, Curro Burro will destroy them. And you, my friend, will take part in their destruction."

CHAPTER 4

Death Watch

PERHAPS the Mexican dwarf was not wholly sane. Perhaps it was the imagining of a warped brain. But Rock Tucker did not think that Curro

Burro was crazy. The Arizona Ranger believed him.

Together they waited at Bitter Springs Well for the coming of dawn. And after Curro's strange tale was ended, while they sat there in the scrub mesquite and waited, the ugly face softened and in his eyes Rock read what the girl Magdalena had once seen in those eyes for beauty.

"I am Curro Burro. A man, they say, who is touched in the brain. A ragged wanderer, homeless in the hills where the wild burros are. A troubador, a dwarfed Mexican buffoon, singing strange songs that have no meaning. Haunted by strange visions that come from somewhere beyond this life.

"A harmless, kindly man, for the most part. I have helped many men and women. The old and infirm, the maimed and the blind. I have helped those whom Carlos and Barnabas Kemp have harmed. There are many whom I have aided and they pray for me."

Curro Burro pointed to two men on horseback in the distance, there in the early dawn, herding ahead of them a laden pack mule. They were about half a mile away. The stars were fading in the sky and the round white moon was ghostly white in the early dawn.

Curro Burro walked out from the scrub mesquite. He stood there, a squat dwarfish man on bowed legs, and cupped both hands to his mouth.

Rock Tucker watched, gripped in a strange spellbound silence.

So high-pitched and keening was the voice of Curro Burro, that Rock Tucker's human ears, strained to catch the sound, scarcely heard it. It was only the barest vibration against the ranger's eardrums.

But the wild burros heard the sound and broke brush in a startled stampede. The line-backed dun jumped and snorted in fear. Out yonder almost half a mile away, the pack mule heard the thin, high-pitched sound no human ear could detect, jumped

and broke into a terrified run. The horses Carlos and Barnabas Kemp were riding lunged and whirled, stampeding. It caught Carlos and Barnabas unprepared and both men were thrown heavily. Before they could get back on their feet, their saddle horses and the pack mule carrying the contraband were gone, stampeded, and the popping and slapping of the empty stirrups only added impetus to their wild terrified stampede.

Curro Burro stepped back into the scrub mesquite, grinning, chuckling.

"That is the sound too high pitched for the human ear. The warning heard only by animals. The warning of danger."

Curro Burro and Rock Tucker could see Carlos and Barnabas Kemp, two huge blots against the sand and desert skyline.

"Their carbines," Curro Burro said, "are in their saddle scabbards. They are afoot and at the mercy of Curro Burro. But there is no mercy in my heart for that father and son.

"Soon you will see. They are fat and soft and their lardy carcasses are saturated with tequilla. When the sun comes up, they will sweat and they will suffer thirst and crave liquor. Their nerves will become taut as fiddle strings keyed so tight that another small twist will snap them. And out yonder in the hot sand and under the blazing sun, Carlos Kemp and his son Barnabas will suffer the tortures of hell on earth as they have made other men and women suffer. And Curro Burro will watch their suffering."

Carlos Kemp and his son Barnabas watched their saddle horses and the laden pack mule till the animals were out of sight and gone. They stood there, bewildered and dazed and uncertain, realizing slowly, reluctantly, their desperate plight.

Then Carlos Kemp turned around and started walking toward the Bitter Springs well. He was limping badly. Barnabas came up alongside his father and Carlos reached out a hand and gripped the shoulder of his

big son and leaned heavily on Barnabas for support. They started walking slowly, boots sunk deep in the loose desert sand.

Curro Burro had unslung his carbine. He raised the rear sight to its last notch, his eyes wicked as they lined the carbine sights. The gun cracked, shattering the silence of the early dawn. The bullet kicked the sand ahead of Carlos and Barnabas, and they halted, tracked there in the sand as the gun echoes died away.

Curro Burro walked out into the open. His voice called out across the desert: "I am Curro Burro. Come no further or I'll shoot to break your legs. Only the desire to watch your aimless futile staggering when slow delirium takes hold, keeps me from crippling you. You can expect no mercy from Curro Burro. I will watch you die of thirst and the heat from the sun that strikes you from God's sky. The sun will blaze down on you both with all the heat of hell. And Curro Burro will laugh and watch you die a slow death.

"I have waited long for this time to come. When I leave your carcasses here for the buzzards, I will go away cleaned and purged of the poison of bitterness and revenge and hatred. My blood will flow clean in my veins. Curro Burro will at last be freed from his vows of retribution."

The carbine in the Mexican dwarf's hands cracked again and again. The bullets showered sand on Carlos and Barnabas Kemp as they stood tracked, afraid to move. The gun barrel was hot when he lowered the saddle carbine.

"Sit down. Meditate your evil crimes. Only wickedness and evil bind you together as father and son. You will die together. Alone with the ghosts of the dead to haunt you."

Curro Burro lifted his head and from his throat came a harsh ugly sound. It was the croaking ugly sound made by buzzards when they sight something dead.

The buzzards had taken wing, alarmed by the shooting. They wheeled and settled

back in the scrub mesquite when the echoes died away. But now they flapped wings and took to the air, circling over the Kemps.

"The superstitious say that when a murdered man dies he comes back in the shape of a buzzard," called Curro Burro. "Count the buzzards that circle the air above you waiting for you to die."

THE buzzards wheeled lower and lower in the air above Carlos and Barnabas Kemp, until Barnabas could stand the sight of them no longer. He jerked his six-shooter and emptied it at the buzzards.

Curro Burro grinned wickedly.

"You followed the luckless Fred Farwell here to Bitter Springs Well and killed him. You, Barnabas. Your evil eyes have seen the sister of Fred Farwell, and you promised Fred much money if he would deliver his sister into your hands, and threatened him with death if he failed. It was not to punish the renegade's treachery that you

killed him, but because he did not fulfill his ugly bargain.

"But that was not Fred Farwell's fault. I stopped Molly Farwell on the trail. She would have crossed the border to meet her brother Fred here. She was going to plead with you, Barnabas Kemp, to spare Fred's life. Fred never told her that he had made a deal with you to deliver her into your evil hands. It was I, Curro Burro, who sent her back to safety with an armed escort to guard her. I lied when I told her that her brother Fred was dead. A white lie, because I knew that within a few hours Fred Farwell would be murdered."

Rock Tucker's face was white under its weather color. His hand gripped his gun, but Curro Burro held him back.

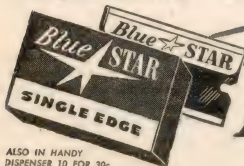
"Barnabas Kemp is deadly with a gun and so is his father. Why risk your life on such foul things?

"Besides, I have waited long, long years for this hour. I have planned it patiently

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these endless years. To pay my debt to the one and only woman who could bear to look at Curro Burro without a shudder of disgust.

"Who are you, my friend, to deny me vengeance? I will send you back to the woman you love, unhurt, unharmed."

They waited all that long day, Curro Burro and Rock Tucker, in the shade of the scrub mesquite. They had the bitter water to quench their thirst, dry jerky to eat, and bitter coffee to wash it down.

Our yonder Carlos Kemp and his son Barbaras suffered the untold tortures of hell on earth. They were without shade to protect them from the merciless sun, without a drop of water to quench their parched throats, without booze to satisfy the horrible craving of their whiskey-soaked bodies.

They cursed and blasphemed until their voices were no more than a croaking sound. They slobbered and begged and groveled and whined for mercy. And there was no mercy.

When Rock Tucker could stand it no longer, he got to his feet. Curro Burro moved swiftly. The broad dull edge of his machete clubbed down across the back of Rock Tucker's neck and he went out like a light. It was like a rabbit punch, buckling his knees and dropping him senseless. His hands were tied behind him when he came alive.

"Forgive me, friend," Curro Burro said quietly. He was pouring water on Rock's head and face.

Rock lay with his head pillowed on his saddle. The inside of his skull pounded with dull pain.

At dusk, Curro Burro untied Rock's hands.

"They come." He pointed across the stretch of desert sand.

Carlos Kemp and his son Barnabas, ugly hulking blots against the darkening sky, staggered toward them, shuffling, weaving like drunk men. Half crazed by delirium, gripping their six-shooters.

CURRO BURRO let them come. He and Rock Tucker waited with their six-shooters gripped in their hands, there in the scrub mesquite. Waited until Carlos and Barnabas Kemp reached the Bitter Springs Well.

Curro had drawn a bucket of water and set it on the ground beside the well. Both men were on their hands and knees, fighting for the first drink of water. They drank with their faces buried in the water bucket. When they had swilled down all the water their bellies could hold, Curro Burro called from the scrub mesquite.

"There beside the well lies a leather bottle containing pulque. It holds a gallon. Swill down enough of the rotgut to put courage into your bellies. When you're drunk enough to fight, Rock Tucker, Arizona Ranger, and Curro Burro, Chief of the Mexican Secret Police, will meet you out in the open."

There was little of the pulque left when Carlos snatched it out of the hands of his son Barnabas and drained it and flung the empty leather sack aside. He jerked his six-shooter and his bull-like bellow sent its far-flung echoes into the desert night:

"You dwarfed son of a toad!"

The moon was rising when Curro Burro stepped from the scrub mesquite out into the moonlight. Curro Burro, Chief of the Mexican Secret Police, had a gold badge pinned to his shirt. His eyes glowed like red coals and his wide mouth spread in a grin.

Rock Tucker, Arizona Ranger, stepped out beside him into the moonlight.

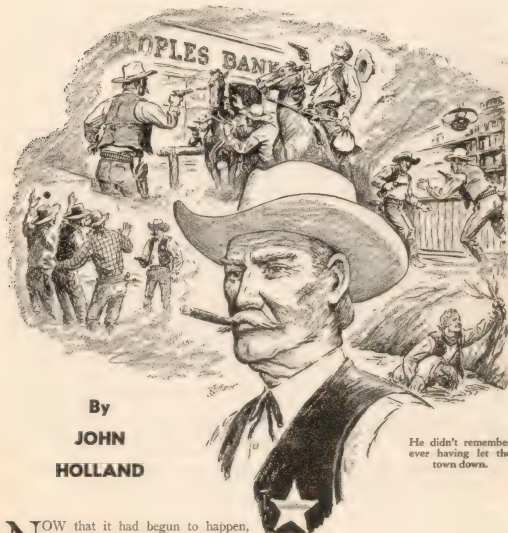
The desert silence exploded in ear-shattering gunfire. The four guns seemed to spit fire at almost the same instant, but Curro Burro shot twice before either of the two Kemps jerked a gun trigger.

Rock Tucker's bullet struck Barnabas in the belly, but there was already a bullet hole between Barnabas' bloodshot eyes. His bullet went wild, and so did his father's.

(Please continue on page 112)

Farewell to the Star

It had been the marshal's guts and the marshal's guns that had put the peace in Peacepipe. So who could blame him for wanting to go out in a blaze of glory?



By
**JOHN
HOLLAND**

He didn't remember
ever having let the
town down.

NOW that it had begun to happen, now that his last day was here, Marshal Dad MacLain could see he'd been 'wrong, last night, when he'd told Pam he didn't want this day to be different from any other. He knew now that he did. He wanted it to be a day when they'd all

come up to him and say, "Howdy, Marshal," and want to pat him on the back or give him cigars or buy him drinks. He wanted it to be a day he'd remember—a day when he could see in their eyes that

they were grateful for what he'd done for the town. But he could tell it wouldn't be.

He could tell from the way Pam stood, there at the stove, that she was going to take him at his word. She was going to go right on acting as if this was just another morning and he would still be marshal tomorrow, instead of Jim. Only damn it, she'd ought to know better. She'd ought to know how he felt about this. It wasn't every day a man retired.

Dad shoved his cup across the table, not looking at Pam, and when he spoke his voice had more of a growl to it than he'd intended.

"Pour me another cup," he said; and then, to soften the tone of it, he added, "And have one with me, Pam." He couldn't tell her outright. It wasn't right for him to have to ask for his pat on the back. Maybe if he just kind of hung around, she'd get the idea.

"Now, Dad," Pam said, "you'll be late. You can't just sit here all morning long."

"Why? If I want to sit here, why can't I? Jim'll handle things till I get down."

"But, Dad, you know you shouldn't. And besides, I have things to do today. Things I can't do with a grumpy old bear in the house. Now give me my kiss and run along."

MacLain leaned back in his chair and looked at her. She sat prim and straight, her face fresh and young and more like his face than Tess'. She was clean-limbed and blue-eyed, with a soft roll of dark hair knotted at the base of her skull. Looking at her, MacLain found himself wishing she didn't look so much like him.

He discovered, now, after twenty years, that the strong resemblance she bore to him wasn't the satisfying thing it once had been. Not that he really wanted it any other way. It was just that there was so little of Tess in Pam that he found it hard to recall what Tess had really looked like. And he needed Tess now. He needed just the sound of her voice or her touch, and he

needed the comfort he used to find in watching her move about the kitchen, back when Pipestone was young and he was marshal and when he left the kitchen in the mornings there was a real chance he might not see it again that night. Tess had been a rock to him in those early days.

"Since when have you been so busy all day?" MacLain asked. "Don't tell me it's tough keeping an old man like me. I never lose my buttons. I don't dirty the house. You got it easy."

"I know," Pam said.

"Then have a cup of coffee with your dad. That ain't too much to ask."

Pam looked at him, her eyes wrinkled at the corners, laughing at him. She rose and went to the stove, a tall girl in her early twenties, with an ease of motion that was smooth and fluid. She got the pot and came back and poured his cup and her own and then returned to the stove.

MacLain took up his spoon and began to stir his coffee slowly. He had the feeling that he'd won, now, and that all he'd have to do was wait her out. And he didn't blame her for not knowing right away what it was he felt. She was young. She had her mind full of Jim Lambert, like as not, and there was one thing Dad had learned in his fifty years and that was you couldn't expect the youngsters to know what you felt right off. It took a little time.

"Will you be seeing Charlie Iverson today, Dad?" Pam asked, her back to him, her shoulders moving slowly as she worked a rag along the top of the stove.

"I might," MacLain said. "If he's around."

CHARLIE was a rancher. He lived east of Pipestone on the shelf and MacLain was buying his ranch. It wasn't much. Just a small spread with fair grass and good water—artesian—that didn't look ever to quit because the mountains were a dome. It was a good buy at the price, and the thing that MacLain had spent his dreams

on through all the long years as marshal.

But right now, he didn't want to talk about what would happen after today. Right now, he was in a mood to talk about the things that *had* happened. Yesterday and before. He wanted to go over them with Pam. He wanted to tell her things he never had. Things like the time he'd shot Gus Walker in the afternoon and the way the morning had been before it happened—and how he'd felt, walking the length of the street to face Gus, alone, afraid and worried what would happen to Pam if it worked out Gus shot him first. She'd been nine, then, with Tess two years dead, and MacLain had felt like a fool that day when it was over. It was then he'd resolved to get him a place on the shelf. But it had taken ten years.

"Then have him tell Ada I'll buy her curtains," Pam said. "I couldn't make up my mind for a while. But I talked it over with Jim and we decided we could. I think Ada needs the money."

"Why, girl," MacLain said, "I can buy you curtains. You don't need to go buying any curtains you don't want."

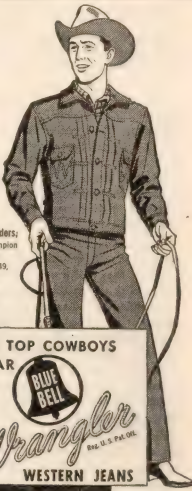
"I know. I want them, though. I was only thinking of how Ada would feel."

MacLain took his spoon out of his cup and set it firmly on the table. It riled him, Pam thinking that way. He didn't see where Ada had a right to make Pam worry about how she felt. Not when MacLain had a right to a little consideration of his own.

Why, hell, he was the girl's father. He'd kept her fed and dressed all these years, and he'd done it as good as any woman could. He figured if anyone had a right to have her thinking about how they felt, it was him. But he guessed she took him for granted. He guessed she didn't think he'd done much these last ten years, and it made him want to laugh to think she'd worry more about Ada than him. Especially today.

"I don't suppose you thought to brush

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my hat," MacLain said. "I suppose you got so busy worrying about Ada Iverson you forgot you had a father at all."

"No," Pam said. "I brushed it."

"Well, I don't see it around."

"I'll get it," Pam said and moved past MacLain into the front room.

MacLain sat there in the kitchen, not really sorry he'd said that, but not feeling too right about it either. Pam brushed his hat every morning and MacLain was careful not to rub dirt into it through the day as he wore it. That way a hat lasted twice as long and kept on looking good.

But it wasn't that he minded the hat itself so much. It was only that he'd have liked it if Pam had brought the hat to the kitchen with her and had sat there brushing it while he tried to tell her how he felt. It would have helped some, to have her do that. But now the only way he could look at it was to think that if he'd bought a new hat the way he'd wanted, it would have cost him about as much as Pam meant to spend to make Ada Iverson feel comfortable about her curtains.

MacLain finished his coffee, scalding his lips, and rose and followed Pam into the front room. She finished with the brushing as he came up to her and held the hat out and MacLain took it, not looking at her. She'd always used her tongue to help her along on any job she had to do with her hands, and when he'd first come into the front room from the kitchen, her tongue had been working right along with the brush and her face had been intent and placid.

So now he felt foolish and mixed up and wanted to say he was sorry for saying what he had. Only the hell of it was, what he'd said wasn't a big enough thing worth saying he was sorry for, and if he said it now, she'd wonder what was wrong. Then he'd have to tell her how he felt. And he couldn't do that. Not outright. Even on the day he retired; a man didn't ask his daughter for a pat on the back. It was a

thing you had to take for granted. Only MacLain wished she'd *show* him she knew.

"Well, good-by, Dad," Pam said and she touched his arm and put her cheek up to be kissed.

MacLain bit his lip and looked down at the floor. There was a silence, there, for a time, and then Pam drew back.

"Are you all right, Dad?" she asked.

"I'm fine," MacLain said.

"It isn't your shoulder?"

"No."

"Then don't be grumpy," Pam said. "It won't rain." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "Now good-by, Marshal. Don't be late."

MacLain looked at her, then, and saw the calm face and the crinkling around the eyes. The blankness, almost, and the youth of her and the potential womanhood and understanding that lay deep in her, but not for him. Sleeping, still, and not yet touched and brought to life. He sighed heavily and straightened. Then he said, "Good-by," and put on his hat and walked out the door.

He was careful to close the gate, going out, and when he looked back and waved, the way he usually did, Pam waved back. She'd come through the door and she waved to him the way she would have on any other morning of his life, and just the fact that she'd done that, as if it *was* any other morning, made him feel somehow sad and old.

HE TURNED away from the gate and moved through the early morning heat, the sleeping town, soft and peaceful, that he'd had his share in building. Out of habit, his hand went to his shirt and drew out a cigar. He lighted his match as he passed the Widow Jorgensen's fence, adding today's scratched black mark to the marks he'd scratched there every morning since he'd moved into the house with Tess as his bride. Usually he took a quiet satisfaction from his cigar, but this morning it tasted flat, and MacLain thought of

throwing it away and buying fresh when he got down as far as the Overholser. But the habit of economy was hard in him, binding him like iron, and he resolved to finish the cigar, bitter or not. But it seemed a hell of a thing to have to do.

He curled his lip against the bitter taste of it and moved down the street to Mattson's General Store. There, he straightened slightly and turned in as he would have on any other morning. Only now, thinking ahead to seeing Alf, remembering that he was a man of fifty too and that he'd been one of the first in Peacepipe, MacLain felt somehow relieved. Alf was a man and where Pam was a woman and wouldn't understand, Alf was sure to know how MacLain would feel. And he wouldn't be afraid to show it.

MacLain pushed through the door into the dim, dry-smelling store and moved back along the counter with its bolts of gingham and the folded work clothes, heading toward the apple barrel that stood just to the right of his chair. He felt deep in the barrel, looking over his shoulder at Alf who was back in the far corner of the store with Nate Carson's new wife. He nodded once, when Alf looked his way and Alf said, "Marshal," and turned back to Mrs. Carson.

MacLain brought up a fat apple and polished it slowly on his sleeve. Then he crossed to the chair he always sat in, and turned it and sat down, bringing his long legs up and resting his boots on a coil of rope.

Presently, Alf came to the front of the store with Mrs. Carson and MacLain waited quietly while he totted her bill and she paid and then left. Then MacLain cocked the chair back and looked at Alf.

"While you're at it, Alf," he said, "maybe you better figure up what I owe you for all these apples. High time I was paying."

"Who's worried?" Alf said and went on writing in his gray ledger.

"Well, I figure it's been a lot of apples. One a day for twenty years. That mounts up."

"Just in season," Alf said. He turned his back on MacLain and slipped the ledger onto the back shelf. Then he put his pencil behind his ear, bent and came up with a wooden box. He was a thin, dry-looking man, with large round ears and gold-rimmed glasses. He wore a black vest and a white shirt with sleeve garters and a black string tie. He was neat and precise and shrewd, and as he came through the cut in the counter, carrying the box, moving with his half skip, MacLain's mind threw up a picture of the day some eight years back when the Mason bunch had come to town.

The Masons had been rough and wild from the trail, and one of the Mason punchers had got drunk and made trouble for Alf. It was whiskey he'd wanted, and when Alf couldn't make him believe he didn't sell it, the puncher had pulled his gun. He'd fired it once at the ceiling—there was a tin patch up there still—but Alf had stood his ground. And MacLain had heard the shot from the street and come at a run, in time to see the puncher throw down on Alf for sure.

MacLain had drawn, then, and the puncher squeezed off another shot just as Alf ducked behind the counter. So MacLain hadn't shot. He'd run at the puncher instead, thinking to land on him from behind, but the puncher had seen him and whirled, drunk and feeling trapped. He'd fired again, then, and MacLain had felt the sting in his shoulder and the kick of it, and had lost his balance so that he fell sideways against the puncher and they both went down.

That could have been the one, that time. And it would have been except for the cut in the counter and the way Alf whacked the puncher with the ledger, bringing the back of the thing sharp and hard against the puncher's neck.

MacLain grunted once, thinking of this, and turned slightly in his chair and watched Alf move to the back of the store with the box. He set it on a chair and drew an order slip from his pocket and the pencil from behind his ear. Then he began to move along the counter, filling the box with canned tomatoes, flour and salt and other provisions.

"I see you never got around to really fixing your roof," MacLain said. He had to raise his voice to make it carry across the deadening dry goods to the back of the store.

"What roof?" Alf said, checking off an item on his list.

"Why, your roof. Up there when the Mason cowpuncher shot that hole."

"Oh, that," Alf said. "Hardly know it's there. It don't leak."

MacLain turned away, then, and faced the front of the store.

HE COULDN'T understand Alf not paying any more attention to that hole. There'd been other stores shot up in the West, and MacLain had heard other storekeepers take a kind of lefthand pride in any bullet holes they had in their walls. It was even good for business.

Only Alf wasn't that kind. Alf took things for granted. He probably never thought of that tin patch up there at all, or when he thought of it he probably remembered how he'd hit the puncher with the ledger. He probably didn't even remember MacLain had been in it too. To hear Alf tell it, he was all alone in it and MacLain was late getting there with help.

MacLain lifted his legs from the rope and drove his heels hard down on the floor. He rose abruptly and stood looking back over the dry goods at this man who had saved his life and who'd forgotten that it had ever happened, that MacLain was even there.

Alf turned slowly and looked at MacLain.

"Leaving, Dad?" he said mildly.

"I guess," MacLain said, holding it in, not saying what he wanted to.

"Well, then I'll see you," Alf said and turned back to his list and his box.

MacLain crushed his apple core in his fist and stood looking at the back of Alf's neck. So there it was. All right out where he could see it. Even Alf took things for granted. Even Alf who'd saved MacLain's life just took it for granted that every town had a marshal. He didn't understand. And he wouldn't. Alf would always have his store. He'd never have to retire.

Well, that was all right with MacLain. He'd move out to the shelf and he'd be damned if he'd have much to do with Alf again. Even Saturdays. MacLain turned slowly, making an effort to keep control, and he moved to the door and went out, not particular about slamming the door.

Moving along the boardwalk, people who saw him spoke and MacLain growled his answer and no one stopped him or offered him a cigar. No one even let on that today was any different from any other day, and MacLain was damned if he'd let 'em get him. So he stiffened his back and moved stolidly on to the jail.

Jim Lambert sat in MacLain's chair at the desk, his heels up and his spurs riding in the scars MacLain's spurs had cut in the wood over the years. He was a long-legged, high-shouldered man, with long, flat hands, a full, rich mustache and level blue eyes. When MacLain came in, he swung his legs down and rose to stand half a head taller.

"Been waiting for you, Dad," he said. "You're late."

MacLain stiffened. "That so?"

"Sure. You usually get here around seven. Right now, it's almost nine. And I got things to do."

"Have you, now," MacLain said.

"That's right," Jim said. His smile was fading, now, and his tone was guarded.

"Sure it's nothing I couldn't handle?" MacLain said.

It irritated him that this kid who used to follow him on his rounds was grown up, now, and a deputy. And a deputy who made his own work without asking the marshal. A deputy who sat in the marshal's chair with his feet on the marshal's desk and spit in the marshal's cuspidor. All but giving orders. Taking over MacLain's job, marrying his daughter and deciding to buy Ada Iverson's curtains with money MacLain could have used for a hat. Or for cigars that didn't bite.

"Well, if you want to do it you can," Jim said. "Only it's just serving a warrant on Frank Sarratt and posting notice of the sheriff's sale. That and the rounds. I figured—"

"Well, you ain't paid to figure," MacLain said. "And you won't be till I get around to quitting and I ain't quit yet. Now get outa here and serve that warrant!"

Jim stiffened. He started to say something, but thought it over and changed his mind. It was a good thing he did, because MacLain might have lifted his star right then. He might have told this fresh young kid to pack and git, Pam or not.

He didn't know what people thought he was. He wasn't so old he *had* to quit. He was quitting today because he figured he deserved a rest. He figured he'd found a man who could handle things, who was young enough and fast enough to face down the best in a gun fight. But looking at Jim, he wasn't so sure. He'd handed this kid the tamest town in the territory—a town that he, MacLain, and no one else had civilized—and the kid didn't have sense enough to be thankful for what he was getting. MacLain could tell that from the lack of respect.

Jim sighed softly and the knot of muscle that had stood out white at the angle of his jaw went flat. He smiled.

"All right, Dad," he said quietly. "I'll have to be gone all morning, though. You make the rounds?"

"Hell, yes, I'll make 'em!" MacLain said. "Now get outta here. And don't ask to use my horse. Use your own horse and spit in your own gaboon from now on! Now git!"

Jim nodded and crossed to the desk. He stuffed the warrant and the sale notice in his shirt and nodded once to MacLain and left.

MACLAIN sat down at his desk and opened the drawer and drew out his gun oil and his cleaning rags. Then he raised his feet to the desk and his spurs found the scars and rested in them and he drew his .44.

He rodde out the shells and laid them on the desk and fell to cleaning his gun. It was the thing he always did first in the morning when he had things to think over, regardless of whether the gun was clean or not. And looking at it, feeling the familiar smooth chill of it along his fingers, he grew calmer and tried to think what it was that kept people from seeing the way he felt.

He didn't remember ever having let the town down. And it seemed only fair to him now that the town didn't let him down. He'd stuck his neck out enough. He'd run his chances to the end and back again, and more times than he wanted to remember he'd been afraid. And the older he got and the more he knew he was slowing down and the more he knew from experience how things could be, the more he was afraid. But he'd stuck with it.

He'd gone charging into Alf's that time at an age when most men didn't think of using a gun for anything except hunting. He'd shot it out with that bunch that had tried to rob the bank in '71. He'd shot Gus Walker, and he'd saved Bub Stenger from drowning in the winter of '68 when Bub was still young and hadn't settled down to medicine. He'd faced down punchers just off the drives; he'd kept order in a town that was rotten at the top that year that

George MacArdle got himself elected mayor, and he'd faced down the town itself that time they'd wanted to hang Art Rushton because he'd got himself drunk and woke up lying by old Tim Cahill who had his throat cut. So if the town was anything at all, it was because MacLain had been there and done his part.

Not that he was the only man who could have done the job. He wasn't. He knew that. But the thing was, he *was* the man who'd done the job and now, here on his last day, his own daughter and Alf Mattson and the kid he'd brought up to be marshal in his place were willing to let him turn over his job and not even a word of thanks. That was hard to take.

MacLain sat in the jail, then, cleaning his gun and thinking these things, until half the morning was spent and habit came through to him again. Then he swung his feet off the desk, holstered his gun and rose and moved to the door.

He stepped into the street to make his rounds, turning left out of habit and drawing the day's second cigar from his shirt. He lighted it and moved east along the boardwalk, a tall, thick-set man, muscular and looking younger than his years. But a bent man, now, with a slope to his shoulders and a dragged-down look at the corners of his mouth.

He moved along steadily, east to the end of the street and then across it and back along the south, stopping now and then, at the livery and the Golden Boy, climbing steps to speak to Doc Stenger and Woodall, the lawyer, moving along steadily and at each stop watching to see if the faces showed any willingness to admit he'd helped. And at each stop taking his rebuff and moving on, knowing in his heart it was not an intended rebuff, but feeling lost just the same, because not one of them met him with gratitude showing.

He stopped in the bank to speak to Guy Stacey, nodding as he entered in the direction of young Art Rushton's cage, but

Guy was busy writing up a loan and there were people in town to do their banking, so he couldn't work in a talk with Art. He left the bank, then, and moved alone down to the west end of the boardwalk and then north across the street and back to the jail to complete the rounds.

He looked to the clock in the jail, knowing without looking that it was noon and that he ought to go on back to the house, but he couldn't leave until Jim came back. So he sat down again at his desk, now for the last time, and his feet found the scars again and he pulled his hat down over his face and slept.

He woke with a start, listening and trying to hear what it was that had roused him, but hearing only silence. And then it struck him that the silence itself was it, and that on a normal day there'd be people in the streets and the sound of traffic along the boardwalk. Now there was none. He stiffened and rose from his chair.

HE TURNED and checked his gun, feeling useful again and needed. Then he ran to the door, certain something was wrong and not certain what, afraid of what he'd find.

But he found nothing. The street was empty, the boardwalks white and glaring in the sun. It was strange and unreal and frightening, this being left alone. So he turned, then, and moved at a brisk trot up the boardwalk toward the livery and his horse.

But just as he gained the livery he heard the jinglings of a team at his back and he turned and saw a buckboard moving his way, past the jail, a man and a woman in it. Then, as it drew closer he saw it was Jim Lambert and that the woman was Pam and he sighed, vastly relieved. Not alone.

Lambert brought the buckboard up sharply at the livery door. MacLain could tell from the calm way he sat and the tone of his voice that the trouble he'd thought he'd find did not exist, and he smiled up

at Lambert as Lambert smiled down at him.

"We wondered where you were," Lambert said. "Looks like the whole town is taking a siesta and Pam and I—well, we figured why not have a picnic. And you come along, Dad. The town'll do without a marshal for an hour."

MacLain looked up at them, sitting there together, Pam with her arm linked in Lambert's and Lambert tall and straight and young. And it made him feel old and ashamed for having wanted the thing he had from them. They were young. And he'd been young once too and the truth of it was, he wouldn't have thought to give an old marshal the kind of treatment he'd wanted from them. And that only proved how long ago it had been that he was young. A man could forget in twenty years what he'd thought and felt like at Lambert's age. That is, he could forget unless he had a daughter and was lucky enough to have a

man like Lambert for her. So MacLain shook his head.

"No," he said, and smiled. "You kids run along. I'll just go on up to the house and have a nap."

Lambert turned and looked at Pam, his smile only slightly clouded, and Pam chuckled softly, more at Lambert than at MacLain. "Now don't be bull-headed, Dad," she said. "We're going down to the river and you can sleep there in the shade as well as you can sleep at the house. Besides, everything we have to eat is in that basket. Come around here and sit beside me."

She shifted over, then, making room for him, and Lambert slapped the backs of the team with the reins and turned the buckboard west, heading for the river.

Some one must have warned the crowd because MacLain didn't hear them until the first gun went off and then there must have been another hundred shots, just as they

(Please continue on page 113)

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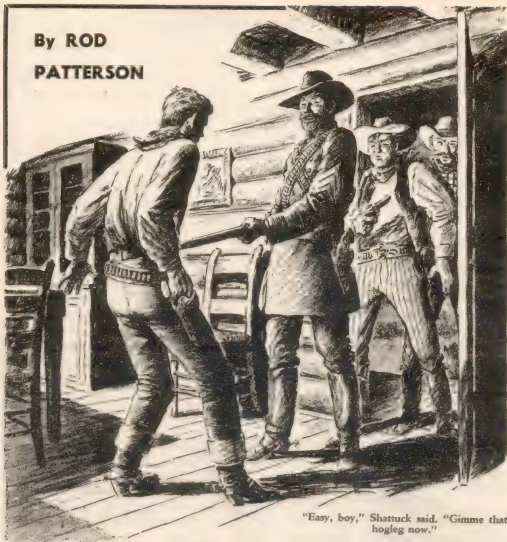
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By ROD
PATTERSON



"Easy, boy," Shattuck said. "Gimme that hogleg now."

TRIAL BY GUNFIRE

Left as the lone guardian of his spread and his women folk, the kid had to grow up fast—as fast as a bullet hits home!

ALL up and down the Cheyenne River they still tell about Cav Shattuck and the wild bunch that pillaged and killed in South Dakota during the War between the States, and later made the Black Hills their stamping ground. Not many folks dared offer challenge to Shattuck, and the few who did never lived to talk about it. But a chuckle-headed kid

named Bodie Telford stood up to the outlaw on an April day in '68; and the tale-spinners never heard of it because Bodie held his tongue. His reason was not modesty. Bodie had a sounder reason, a heroic one that never reached the legend-makers of the time.

On the warm spring day he started for Washita with the big trail herd, William Telford stood near the corral of the sod-roofed ranch house at Fiddler's Ford and waved good-bye to his family. His young second wife of six months stood in the doorway dabbing at her brimming tears and trying not to weep aloud. His daughter Kate, long sick with lung fever, waved from her bed that had been drawn close to a window. On the low-beamed porch stood Bodie, his sixteen-year-old son, a lanky lad with heavy shoulders, nearly as tall as his rawboned father.

On this bright morning Bodie felt the weight of the world, and it had turned him as sober as a prairie owl. He walked a little way across the pleasantly sunny yard with his father before the latter mounted his cow horse to join the other riders, who were already stringing the beef drive southward across the river flats.

"Bodie," Will told him gravely, "I set a great store of trust in you even if you ain't exactly man-grown yet. That's why I'm leavin' you to look after Loro and your sister till I git back from this drive."

Bodie nodded, feeling as tall as the sky at his father's words. "I'll take keer of 'em, Pa," he answered in a voice that wavered comically between bass and treble. "No call you should worry none."

"It ain't only the women I'm thinkin' after, son. There's the three thousand dollars we got stashed—you know where. It's took us five years to save that money. With the beef money we kin pay the mortgage off and restock. The part I worry about is there's folks know we've been thrifty and saved. In hard times men'll do bad things."

"Yes, Pa."

"We're a-goin' to need the money, son. Doc says we got to take your sister up to St. Jo this fall. But you know all that. I jest wanter be sure you understand, is all."

"I do that, Pa," Bodie said earnestly.

Will laid a gentle hand on his son's arm. "I wish't you'd try and be kind to Loro. I savvy it's a lot to ask with the fine mother you and Katie had, but—"

"Never aimed to be mean to her," the kid said, red to the edges of his sorrel-colored hair. "I've tried mighty hard to git to like her, same as you asked me. On'y I don't know—"

"Loro's had a heap of powerful mean trouble in her life," Will went on gently, "and she's purty young to be wed to a widder man as old as me. Sure," he added quickly, "I know what you been thinkin'—that a dancehall woman can't be godly. But, son, she is a good woman. I'd stake my life on't!"

He paused, as though he didn't want to speak out all that was on his mind. "Son," he finally blurted, "they's talk around that Cav Shattuck and his bunch're back on the Cheyenne. I heerd it a couple weeks ago and I been expectin' trouble since. I guess I don't have to say why, because you remember that time. . . . Well, anyways, I'd feel a heap easier in my mind if I could be sure Shattuck would keep clear of us. And it ain't only because of the money. It's because—" He floundered with embarrassment.

"You don't need to say it," Bodie told him stoutly. "And if that *orejana* does ride in I'll handle him—and do it like you done the last time!"

"I'd never leave you here thisaway if I didn't have to go along on this drive," Will said worriedly. "First off I wanted to send you with the beef, but the others kicked about givin' a boy a man's chore. They don't know you like I do."

"I'll take keer of everything," said Bodie, and he watched his father mount and

swiftly ride off in the flashing sunshine.

Bodie stood by the corral, a bone-chilling dread beginning inside of him. The trail herd presently was clear down the river, moving into the broad sage valley that was flanked by endless bluff-like hills. In the distance the herd looked no larger than a tawny rope flung down on the rolling land, a long file of beef critters guarded by men, a churning line of hoofs and horns and pounded red clouds of dust and hides and flies and horses.

He watched the pillar of dust dip lower and disappear, then turned and walked thoughtfully back into the house. He could hear his step-mother crying softly in her room as he tiptoed to his sister's bed in the ell. Kate lay silent on the counterpane, a pale thin girl of twelve whose eyes looked up at Bodie and seemed almost bigger than her face.

"Oh, Bodie," she whispered, "I'm scared with Pa gone."

Bodie's mouth turned grim. "I'll take keer of you, Katie. I got one of Pa's guns and I know how to use it. Ain't nothin' gonna happen to you ner anybody else."

"Suppose that man who was here that time comes back, Bodie? What'll we do?"

"I'll handle him," Bodie said stoutly. He turned and went back to the dooryard to his chores.

Kate's fear was real enough, he knew, for he had shared it once. He remembered with bitterness that Loro had brought fear to the Telford house that day six months ago—two years to the day since his mother had died.

LORO had come knocking at their door on a blustery afternoon in early December. Bodie and his father, weary from hours of forking down hay for the wintering herd, sat near the fireplace. Will had been reading sonorously from the great Book that he was holding close to the firelight. When the knock came, they both were startled.

Will called, "Who's there?"

The voice that answered was faint: "It's—a lady."

Bodie looked blankly at his father, who put the Book down and went to the door. He swung it open and stood aside. The firelight made a golden edge to her bonnet and cloak, and one small slipper showed under the hem of her rustling skirt—a skirt so long it swished against the puncheon floor. Holding her dark cloak against her breast with one gloved hand, she entered the low-raftered room that held the smells of cookery and burning greasewood. To Bodie it seemed that she was afraid and yet was trying to be brave for their benefit.

"Sir—" she said in a soft and modulated voice—"will you give me lodging for the night? I will pay whatever you ask."

There was a flavor to her speech that was new to Bodie and judging by the puzzled look on Will's gaunt face, to him also. All the both of them could do was gawk and stare like a pair of tongue-tied fools.

Will recovered first, and spoke kindly. "Ma'am, you're welcome to such as we have in this house but I must tell you there is no woman here—just my daughter who is sick and only a child."

The stranger's eyes, a deep lavender color, stayed on Will as he spoke. "I do not mind," she murmured, smiling wanly. She crossed to the open fire with little steps and extended her hands to the heat. "You are very kind, sir."

Bodie saw the mouth that was painted the color of blood, the darkly penciled brows, the curls of dark red hair, and he smelled the scent of strange perfume that was sweeter than the blooming wild plum that grew in the draws in spring.

"I am Loro McCandless," she said in the same soft tone. "A livery rig brought me from Deadwood and—my trunk is yonder by the trail."

Loro McCandless? Even her name sounded mysterious, and somehow dangerous. Bodie didn't know why, but he hated

her at once. He wondered why she had been brought ten miles from town by a livery driver and then put down in their doorway. Later, he and his father learned that she had been an entertainer at Thorp's Casino in Deadwood and that a pair of cowpokes had fought with guns because of her. She had been ordered to leave by the women of the town. This was credible, for, though Deadwood was a wild, wide-open town in those days, its women held themselves to be of higher station than a dance-hall girl; and they were cruel.

Loro remained with the Telfords for a week, and then one night at supper time there came the sound of hard-ridden horses outside and the coarse shouts of men. Before they could rise to investigate, the front door was flung open abruptly and a strange man bulged in the opening, blocky and big against the sunset. There were three hard-faced riders on the porch behind him.

The man in the door gave the impression of great strength and confidence. He wore a battered black sombrero with its wide brim pulled down rakishly and an old Confederate cavalry officer's uniform with tarnished chevrons and gold braid. He, as well as his roughly clad companions, were powdered with Dakota dust and splashed with mud. The tall man stared at the group at the table, a broad grin on his face and his teeth very white against his curly brass-colored beard.

"What luck!" he sang out in a loud voice. "Why, here's my little queen o' hearts—as big as life and twice as nacheral! Loro, honey, how the hell are yuh?"

Those around the table stared with open mouths—all but Loro, who eyed the stranger with something between fear and rage. Her dark eyes burned at him as she said, "Cav, go way! I want nothing to do with you!"

THE stranger laughed, his head flung back, and he slapped his thigh. He wore two shell belts crossed around his waist,

and there was a well-filled holster at each side, and the bright brass ends of his cartridges glinted with a deadly shine.

"Is that any way to treat your man?" he roared. "Come on, my lady love!" He moved suddenly into the room with clanking spurs. He moved with remarkable grace and dexterity and halted abruptly; and the Telfords saw, too late, that he had placed himself unerringly in a position between the table and the wall where two rifles were hung on pegs. He grinned down at the seated group. Then Will Telford sprang up from his chair and the chair went over backward with a crash.

White to the lips, Will shouted, "What is the meanin' of this deviltry? Breakin' in on peaceable folks like a blasted outlaw? Take your friends and ride on out the way you came!"

"Easy, friend." The stranger's words were soft-spoken now, but his yellow eyes held their cat-like gleam. "You-all are a'talkin' to Cav Shattuck. Mebbe you-all have heerd of me?"

"Maybe we-all have," Will angrily taunted him. "It don't change my mind! Now, git!"

Shattuck put his brash stare on Loro again.

"You a'comin', honey?"

"I never want to see you again!" Loro replied in a cold, tense voice.

Shattuck's eyes glittered like fire on ice. "You'll come along if I gotta have you drug!"

"Shattuck," Will warned in a deadly voice, "if you touch this woman, I will kill you!"

Shattuck threw back his head and laughed. "Kill Cav Shattuck! Hear that, boys?" he hollered at his men staring in from the porch. Then his laugh quit suddenly, and he said, "Don't be a fool, stranger. You'd never stand a chance. All I want is my gal and what Cav Shattuck wants, he gits!"

"There's law in South Dakota," Will

said, "whether you realize it or not!"

"Too damn much law," agreed the other. "It's gittin' so a gent cain't breathe no more. Come on, Loro. We got a long ride."

"I'll not go a step," she retorted in the same cold voice.

Will Telford made a violent movement with his hand and swept several dishes onto the floor with a crash. Bodie had never seen him in such a helpless rage. "Why, you yellow-bellied scoundrel!" he roared. "This young woman couldn't share your ungodly life!"

"Shut up," Shattuck said mildly. He fingered one of his guns. To Loro, he said, "You play the lady with these folks? What if I tell 'em you ain't no lady?"

Will's right hand had been working toward his sheathed bowie knife under his coat. Bodie could see his powerful fingers moving it slowly upward, under the edge of his coat, and he wondered if his father had that much courage to hurl a knife at one man while three others lurked on the porch with rifles and revolvers ready to shoot him down. But Loro broke the tension.

"Will Telford knows about me, Cav. I told him. And I'm staying here—until he wishes me to leave."

Shattuck seemed bewildered by her manner and her words. Suddenly he wheeled and strode toward the door. But he paused long enough to look back and say with his arrogant grin, "I'll come back for you, Loro, when you've had your fill of the gentry."

Then he left with a jingling of his spurs and a thudding of high-heeled boots across the porch. His men went with him, and, in the silent house, the Telfords and their guest heard horses get off at a gallop in the yard.

A week later Will Telford drove Loro to Deadwood and married her before the Methodist preacher. Even Bodie had to concede his new step-mother looked as

beautiful as a picture when Will brought her home that night. She had unpacked her trunk and the gown she had worn for her wedding was a miraculous thing, crinoline and fine white lace with a bustle and lead weights around the hem of the flowing skirt to hold it level when she walked. She wore a frothy gray shawl around her slim shoulders and a small gray bonnet topped with curly plumes. Bodie thought she looked like a vision made of moonlight and cobwebs, but he hated her for her smile and the way she looked at his father, her dark eyes discreetly lowered away from him when he took her in his arms.

And then, next morning, coming in from his chores, he saw the door of Kate's room open and there were Loro and his sister, and the lid of Loro's trunk was thrown back, with laces and ribbons and glittering cloth spilling out of it. Kate's pale thin face was flushed with excitement where she lay on her bed and her thin hands were clasped in reverent admiration, in wonder, at the silk and taffeta dresses Loro was showing her. Bodie turned miserably away.

And these were Bodie's bitter thoughts as he went about his chores that day. He hated Loro and yet had promised his father he would protect her. He found himself almost wishing that Cav Shattuck would return and take Loro away with him.

There was a big hooked rug near the living room stove. After supper that night, while Loro was reading to Kate in her room, Bodie pulled one corner of it back and pried up three loose boards in the floor. Quietly he descended into the small cellar and, uncovering a niche in the earth wall, fingered the three thin bundles of green banknotes hidden there in the musty hole. Then he covered the niche again and climbed back up the rickety ladder.

FOR two days things went along without event. Not that Bodie was content. He avoided Loro whenever possible and

worked outside from dawn till dark. He split firewood and stacked it in the wood shed, brought the horse band in from pasture and herded it out again in the morning, milked their cow night and morning. But he had plenty of time to practice shooting with the big Walker pistol his father had left behind. And he was careful to do his shooting a mile from the ranch so Kate wouldn't hear the reports.

By the end of the week Bodie began to notice a change in Loro. She became restless; the house didn't seem big enough for her; and while she was soft-spoken to Bodie, he detected a note of resentment. She took to wandering in the nearby hills during the afternoons, feeling, no doubt, that Bodie disliked having her near him. During these walks, he trailed her at a distance and always he carried his father's pistol shoved under the waistband of his jeans.

And then one day at sundown old Gramp Hulen, their nearest neighbor, rode into the yard, a cloud of gnats buzzing around his lantern-jawed face, and another swarm making life miserable for his horse. He was a grumbling, pessimistic sort, and worries real or imagined had put a deep furrow between his bushy white brows.

"Bodie," he said ominously, "Cav Shattuck was at Deadwood last night. Thought I better ride over and tell you 'count of—that woman!"

"I ain't worried none," Bodie told him, his tone holding more confidence than he felt.

When Hulen had ridden off, Bodie went into the house and found Loro getting supper in the kitchen. She stood at the work table, her back to him, and she was humming softly to herself, but he felt that she had heard Hulen's warning, had been listening all the time. He waited his chance, and when Loro left the kitchen, he hurried into the sitting room, pulled back the rug, pried up the loose floor boards and went down the ladder into the cellar. When he came up again, he had the three bundles of

banknotes in the pocket of his duck coat.

He heard Loro talking to Kate and he hurried out of the house and went down to the barn. Desperately, he looked around for a place to hide the money. The only spot that seemed safe was the grain bin. He scooped out a few measures of oats and buried the money deep in the grain. Starting out of the barn, he came face to face with Loro:

Her face looked paler than usual and her eyes held a brightness like fever. "Your supper's ready," she said in a strained voice. Then: "Bodie, don't you trust me?"

"No, I don't!" He stiffened before her, glaring defiantly.

"What have I done to make you hate me so?" She was still smiling but there was a hurt in her eyes.

"Nothin'," he flung back, angry that she had followed him. *She don't know where I hid the money*, he thought. "You ain't done nothin' to make me like you, neither!"

"Well, come and get your supper," she said and turned away.

As twilight deepened into dusk and Loro began lighting the lamps, Bodie stole out of the house and made his way up to the bluff behind the corral. As he lay on his belly beneath the pale light of the stars and the glow of the rising three-quarter moon, the river plain lay before him, and his gun was in his hand as he settled down to wait and watch. He listened to the night sounds—the murmur of the river, the wind blowing in the prairie grass, the chirping of crickets, the wail of a far-off coyote. They were voices he knew, but tonight they whispered of trouble and danger and fear.

Presently he heard another sound—the soft thud of hoofbeats coming up the river trail from the south. The sound was made by more than one rider; it was the steady clip-clopping of at least three horses coming at a trot. Bodie sprang up and went sprinting down the slope of the bluff. He reached the ranch yard a second or two be-

fore four horsemen loomed up around the corner of the stable.

Gun gripped in a sweating palm, Bodie stared at the quartet. Moonlight glinted on the trappings of their saddles, on gunbelts and on the rifles they held across their saddlebows. It was easy to pick Cav Shattuck out of the group. He rode a rawboned red horse, his black sombrero set at a raffish angle. The horses were restless under rein. Bodie caught the sharp raw odor of whiskey mingling with the smell of horse sweat and dust. The sound of cocking gun hammers mingled ominously with the sinister voices of the men.

Shattuck leaned forward on his horse, peering and then laughing. "It's only the kid. Light down, boys."

Bodie felt mightily alone and young at that moment, even with the Walker pistol in his hand. He held the gun behind him, saying, "What d'you want with us?"

"Where's your old man?" Shattuck asked, jangling forward while his men dismounted.

"He ain't to home. But I'll speak for him, mister. You ain't wanted here. Nobody here wants to talk to you."

"Better speak for yourself," said the outlaw. He stood close, peering at Bodie, grinning his long tough grin that showed his teeth. "Where's the money hid, bub? You better tell us 'fore we pull the place apart lookin' for it!"

"We ain't got any money," Bodie retorted, shaking inside.

"You lie as easy as you breathe," Shattuck snapped, and he reached out and around and jerked Bodie's gun out of his hand, and flung it into the corral. To his men, Shattuck said, "Go look in the barn. Try the grain bins first."

Bodie hurled himself at Shattuck, striking out with his fists, crazy with fear and fury. But the outlaw knocked him off his feet with a back-handed blow. When he struggled to his feet, Shattuck seized him and dragged him into the house.

LORO stood in the sitting room, her face drawn and pale by the lamplight. Shattuck shoved Bodie into the room and then stood staring at Loro. His smile was an evil thing to see. Loro was breathing fast, and suddenly Bodie knew that it wasn't fear that was causing it. It was the presence of Cav Shattuck. Shattuck stared at her and there was something in his yellowish eyes that froze Bodie motionless against the wall.

Shattuck drawled, "Meant to come after you before, Loro."

Her chin came up stubbornly; her dark eyes shone with a strange and fascinated light. "Well, why didn't you, Cav?"

Shattuck shrugged, then swung his gaze to one of his men behind him on the porch. "Jeb, take the kid outside and hold him."

Bodie pushed his shoulders hard against the wall. "I—I'll kill you!" he gasped in a choking voice.

"Reckon you would," laughed the tall outlaw, "if you had that gun, sonny."

The man on the porch came in and reached for Bodie. Bodie jerked back away from him, his blue eyes ablaze. "Keep your hands off me!" he cried. And he turned and walked out into the yard.

Five minutes later he saw Shattuck come out and join the others. They ignored him and stood in a huddle near the stable for a moment before mounting and riding away down the trail toward Deadwood. As soon as they were out of sight, he ran to the stable. Lighting a lantern, he bent over the feed bin. He rammed his hands into the oats, feeling, feeling. The money was gone!

Then Loro's voice in the stable door behind him said, "I took the money, Bodie. It's safe where I put it, so don't feel bad."

He flung himself around, tears stinging his eyes, his mouth working. "You—you —" He couldn't get the words out between his sobs. He stood there, his fingers knotting and opening at his sides. Finally he was able to speak. "Where'd you put

the money? Where? You gotta tell me."

"If I did, then there'd be two know about it." She shook her head and he saw the fierce shining in her eyes. "No, Bodie, it's my secret now."

"How'd you know where I hid it?" he choked.

"I saw you put it in the feed bin," she told him quietly. "The first place Cav Shattuck would look for it."

"How could you know that?"

"I know Cav," she murmured. "I know how he thinks."

Later, he thought, *She hid the money in her room. I'll find it!*

He sat in Kate's room until very late that night, holding her hand. She had grown worse since their father had left, and was burning with fever and delirious at times. Bodie had got his gun out of the corral and had cleaned the dust out of its barrel. With Kate finally asleep, he carried the gun to his bedroll in the loft under the roof, climbing the steep ladder as quietly as he could.

He undressed in the dark, lay a long time, tossing in his blankets. And then he heard it—three small yips like a coyote's. He stiffened on the straw tick, every sense alert. The yips came again and he heard the groan of a door opening and closing below in the darkened house.

In his night-shirt and boots he scrambled down the ladder, one hand on the rungs, the other holding his revolver. He slid swiftly

out into the dooryard. Anger spurred him toward the sound of a man's voice and a woman's low melodic laugh.

Two people stood in the black shadow of the barn—Loro and Cav Shattuck! Loro's face was a pale oval as she whipped around. Bodie saw Shattuck's quick movement toward his belt. "Damn you!" he cried, and fired the Walker pistol point-blank. But he knew he had missed when Shattuck jumped at him and swung hard with a glittering object that thudded against his temple and dropped him in his tracks.

For what seemed hours he lay where he fell. When finally he fought his way back to consciousness and got to his feet, he saw that he was alone. He went back to the house, weaving and swaying, his mind in a welter of incoherent thoughts. In the kitchen he bathed the lump at his temple with cold water. He was bending over the basin in the dark when a step came close behind him and Loro's voice called in a whisper, "Bodie, are you bad hurt?"

He went rigid. "No," he finally muttered. "But Pa'll kill you when I tell him you met that *orejana*."

"I had to meet him, Bodie," her harsh whisper came back in the darkness. "Don't you understand?"

"You're no good!" Bodie said in a choked low voice. "And I want that money!" He broke off and then gasped. "You didn't hand it over to that—to Shattuck?"

"He'll never get it, Bodie. Trust me!"

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

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Before he could reply she had turned and had gone back to her room. Then he heard Kate's voice calling, "Bodie—Bodie."

He groped his way to her room in the ell and came beside her bed. "What happened, Bodie?" Kate asked breathlessly. "I heard a gun!"

"That danged coyote," he told her, gentling her trembling with his hands. "I missed him."

LORO was already up and getting breakfast the next morning when Bodie came down the ladder from the loft. She looked the way he felt; her face was pallid, her eyes darkly circled as though she had not slept all night. He said nothing but ate his breakfast in sullen silence and went about his chores. He wore the Walker pistol on a shell belt, the holster tied down like a draw fighter's.

When he came into the house for his supper that night, Loro was wearing the shimmering gown — her wedding dress. And she had painted her mouth with scarlet grease and her lips looked wet. But her eyes were haggard.

"Where you goin' in that get-up?" he demanded, staring.

"After supper," she said in a strained voice, "I want you to hook up the buckboard team. I—I have to drive to town."

"No!" he shouted. "I won't let you—"

But he rolled the buckboard out of the wagon shed and hitched up the blacks as she had asked. When Loro came out, she was wearing her cloak and the gray frothy hat with the plumes. Bodie faced her stubbornly.

"I'll drive you," he said flatly.

Loro shook her head. "No, Bodie. Somebody must stay here with Kate."

He knew she was right, but his anger grew. "You goin' to run off with that Cav Shattuck?"

She shook her head, the hurt back in her eyes. "Never."

Then he noticed that she carried no luggage and no handbag, and that meant she had left the money in the house, perhaps in her room. He bit down on further argument and watched her drive the team off into the darkness along the trail. When the sounds of hoofs and wheels had faded to a murmur in the distance, he returned to the house. He spent the next half hour searching Loro's room. He found nothing. If the money was in her room, she had hidden it well.

He went back to the kitchen and sat in the dark beside the stove that was still hot from supper cooking. Kate was sleeping and the house was silent. After a while he rose and bolted the kitchen door, then went through the house and did the same to the front door. He was standing at Kate's door, listening, when he heard the arrival of horses in the yard. There was the hurried arriving trample of hoofs; deep drawling voices growing curt, questioning back and forth; a pony, spent with running, blowing with a long wet breath. He thought he heard Loro's quick laugh.

His heart leaped. Perhaps his father had come home! He ran back to the front door. As the heavy bolt slid back in its hand-forged iron brackets, the door banged inward and slammed around against the wall and Bodie jumped back, grabbing at the bone grip of his gun. But he was not quick enough. The rim of another gun muzzle, a rifle, made a sudden steady pressure against his belt buckle.

The lamp that burned over the fireplace threw its glow on the burly dust-streaked figure of Cav Shattuck. The outlaw entered the room, teeth gleaming in a grin, his yellow eyes glittering. "Easy, boy," Shattuck said in his deep, curiously musical and almost friendly voice. "Gimme that hogleg now." And his hand came out and jerked the weapon out of Bodie's holster.

Bodie stood as if frozen. His eyes shifted swiftly under narrowed lids to left and to right. Two other men were coming in be-

hind Shattuck, one at each shoulder. They had their guns out, too, and Bodie saw them for the first time in clear light. One of the men seemed hardly older than he was, a punk kid with queer, wide-lidded eyes and a wet, brown hank of hair sticking out over his sloping forehead from under the sweatband of his hat. The man's gun muzzle was making small, jerky circles with the nervous tension of the hand that held it.

The other outlaw was a lean, murderous cadaver of an old-timer, dead and stupid. Bodie whipped himself around and started running toward the rifle hanging on the wall.

A gunshot, empty as the slamming of a door in a vast, high room, rang out. A haze of splinters fanned out of the log wall an inch from Bodie's hands as it closed on the rifle stock. He jumped back and turned around, his hands rising.

"That's it, bub," Shattuck said, lowering his rifle. "You got real handsome hands. Hold 'em right there where we can admire 'em!"

Then Bodie saw something that made his eyes pop. A fourth man on the porch pushed Loro into the room, into the lamplight. She jerked away from this man and came toward Bodie where he stood against the wall. Her eyes looked like pools of purple ink against the whiteness of her face.

Her dress swirled around her with a rustling sound, and she walked toward him like a woman stunned or walking in her sleep.

"Good idea, Loro," Shattuck said genially. "You stand right with him while Jeb and me start lookin' for that money. We know it's in the house."

The three outlaws moved slowly into the room, walking with a kind of tired, wobbling deadliness on the high heels of their Texas boots. Now Loro had halted. She turned to face the men, placing her body between them and Bodie.

"Don't dare hurt him, Cav!" she said.

"You lied to me," said Shattuck. "Tried to run a sandy on me, too. But we don't aim to hurt nobody, long as we find that money."

FROM the spot where Bodie stood, he had a view of the hallway, of the three bedroom doors and the kitchen beyond. With agony, he was suddenly aware that Kate's door stood gaping wide open. Another swift flick of his eyes, and he saw a small dim ghost-like figure stealing toward the sitting room through the shadows.

Shattuck and the two outlaws stood out of range of the hall and thus could not see Kate sliding along the wall. Shattuck suddenly moved forward and then was standing with his back to the hall, and he leaned his rifle against the wall and drew one of his sixguns, cocking the hammer. "Cochise, you cover 'em while me and Jeb start lookin'."

The two men slipped around in a moving arc to stand beside Shattuck. The vicious-eyed kid held his gun on Bodie and Loro. So now they all stood with their backs to the hallway. Cav Shattuck was standing in the middle.

Silently, silently, Kate's ghostly figure was coming up the hall. The fourth outlaw had gone back to stand with the horses in the yard.

Then with a quick, sliding patter of bare feet Kate sprang out of the darkened hall and wrapped her skinny arms around Cav Shattuck's thick gun-belted waist. She was on his back, clinging, screaming, "Bodie! Bodie!"

Bodie jumped, throwing himself in front of Loro as the kid outlaw's gun made a dirty orange stab of flame. The stab was knocked downward as Shattuck staggered against him with Kate still clinging to his back. Bodie sprang at Shattuck, and his right arm felt cracked to the shoulder as his fist slogged into Shattuck's face. Shattuck spraddled grotesquely as he fell. Kate was flung clear and rolled against the wall.

And then Bodie turned and started for the old-timer. But Loro sprang at the same moment. Before him and under him she darted, reaching—no, diving—for the gun Shattuck had dropped on the floor; and then the old-timer's gun stabbed once with the same dirty orange flame, and a large lazy blow spun Bodie around. His legs were suddenly pleasantly tired and he staggered.

As he fell slowly, toppling toward the floor, he saw something queer. It was as if an invisible fist was slapping first the old-timer and then the vicious kid. Every time the invisible fist struck, first at the old man and then at the kid, dust jumped out of their coats. And just as Bodie hit the floor, he got his head around and saw Loro, backed against the wall, with Shattuck's revolver spitting steadily, thundering in her calm white hand.

And pitching forward from his knees to bump his head on the floor, Bodie had a fading notion: *Why, she is one of us! Loro is good!*

A darkness came down and smothered him then, but it did not dull the agony under his shoulder blade. And, though he could not see much of anything around him, he heard hoofs thundering across the yard and then shouting started up and after a while he heard his father's big voice shouting anxiously, "Loro! Bodie! Where are you?"

Toward midnight—long after the sheriff

had come from Deadwood and had ridden off with Cav Shattuck—Bodie lay on Loro's bed, candles burning with flickering softness around him. They stood near him, his father and his step-mother, and he saw the smile on Will Telford's weathered face and heard him say:

"Son, you fit like a man and I am proud of you—of Katie, too." He lowered a powerful arm and circled it around Loro's slender waist. "An' Loro saved the money by hidin' it in the hem of her weddin' dress. Didn't I tell you she was good?"

Bodie nodded, and Loro bent close to whisper, "I had to lie to Cav and make him think I'd go away with him. When I made you hitch the team tonight, I was going to take the money to the sheriff, but Cav stopped me on the trail. Do you believe me, Bodie?"

"Course I believe you." He said it gruffly but with a grin. His face screwed up and he bit down on his teeth, for breathing came hard with the pain that was knifing through his chest. And though he could not have put it in plain words, his thought was this:

Any place that you fight for is home. Loro's got a stake here now, and she belongs.

For the rest of the night, Loro sat holding his hands, pressing them from time to time as if they were cold; and her face was very beautiful and abiding there above him in the candle-light.

KATE CROSS-EYES

☆ The widow of one of the most feared Indian warriors of the Old West died recently in Mescalero, New Mexico. She was Kate Cross-Eyes, widow of Geronimo, the last great chieftain of the Apaches. ☆
 Kate Cross-Eyes, third of Geronimo's wives, was believed to be 94 years old. Until her death, she lived on the Mescalero Indian reservation with her son, Robert, Geronimo's sole survivor. ☆
 ☆ Geronimo and his Apaches terrorized Arizona and western New Mexico in the 1870's. The U.S. cavalry could never catch him. However, the wily Indian leader surrendered to the Army in 1886.

H. H.

ROUNDUP

FOR your reading pleasure next issue, Kenneth L. Sinclair has written a stirring tale of a bitter feud between a great silver mine and a cattle empire—and the man who was caught in the middle.

Gil Clayton was a mining man with his own reasons for hating the Walking W. When his wagon broke on Walking W range, he knew he'd never get out without a nod from the tough old foreman, Tren Vance. But when Vance picked a fight with a two-bit rancher, Gil couldn't help buying in. . . .

Gil Clayton, with Johnny at his side, swung the batwing doors of the saloon open and paused there. Gil saw, now, that Vance had a man staked out at either end of the saloon porch.

The man at Gil's end jerked his head meaningly, ordering the two strangers to get themselves out of the line of fire.

Gil said softly, "Put your gun on that tall one, Johnny. Careful now." Then he drew his new .44 and stepped out from behind the door, his weapon leveled upon the man who had his boot on the bench.

The man jerked with astonishment, then straightened and lifted his hands.

Gil heard a subdued cursing at the far end of the porch and concluded that the other man, too, had been unready for the idea that anyone would pull a gun on a Walking W hand.

Gil called, "Nobody behind you now, Burgee. This is Gil Clayton talking. Vance is your turkey."

The rancher didn't draw. He made a sick, sighing sound; and out of the corner of his eye Gil saw the man wrench his reins from the pole and swing into saddle and ride in a quickening run down the street.

Then Vance swore. He said savagely, "Lute, Roy, pull out of here. I'll deal with these meddlesome pilgrims."

The two cowboys sidled from the saloon

porch and disappeared around the corners of the building. Gil holstered his gun, turning to face the Walking W ramrod.

Vance was standing rigid, holding an angrily accusing glare upon Gil. "That places you, mister," he said. "Puttin' in for a sneakin' widelooper!"

"I didn't hear that proved," Gil said. "Old man, you've had some tough going and it's warped your judgment. You're talking wild and not thinking any too straight. You've got the look of an old-time cowman but you've slipped pretty far, to stake out a couple of hombres behind a man before you call him. Maybe you're just not sure of yourself any more, is that it? In the days when I knew the Walking W it didn't need to make setups."

Vance's face darkened. "We do what we got to do," he rumbled, oddly on the defensive now. "Your name's Clayton—that right? Blackleg cattleman, turned miner. Brand-new gun. Brand-new belt to go with it. Hell, where I come from, your kind—"

"You've got my name right," Gil cut in. "I horned into this deal here because it looked dirty to me. My friend and I are going through to the mine. We don't want trouble, but if you think it's worth your while to stand in our way, we'll give you more trouble than your hat can hold."

Vance's brows lifted; then he was glum again. He scowled and said, "Tough ones, hey? Young feller, you don't scare me a little bit. It so happens I'm goin' to let you go through. Never mind why. But here's a piece of advice to go with the favor." He aimed a blunt forefinger toward Gil. "Turn on us, cross the Walking W in any way, an' I'll find it a pleasure to kill you. Now get that wagon of yours fixed and roll it!"

The complete story will be told in "High Valley Dies Hard!"—in the March issue, out December 26th.

THE EDITOR

COPPERTOWN,



CHAPTER I

Sixgun Team

Fire tongued from the
coach and lead slashed
the shadows.

CLARY PARNELL stretched his long legs on the opposite seat of the train and watched the drab Montana landscape roll by the window. The coach, gritty with cinders and black soot, bucked and swayed on the rails, wheels clanking and drawheads clashing. Kirk Hatten stirred beside Parnell.

Exciting

Boomtown Novelette

By ROE RICHMOND

THIS MEANS WAR!



On one side was the huge, all-powerful Copper Combine, on the other the embattled independents. And in between were two scrappy young gunslicks—waiting to set a match to the tinderbox.

"We still on the track, or it is just the flat wheels rockin' us? The Utah Northern oughta give up, if this is the best they can do."

Hatten was always complaining, always scornful of everything. Parnell smiled absently and went on staring through dirty glass at sweeping brown plains and distant snow-peaked mountains. New country to him, and he was interested, but not Kirk Hatten. For having been together so long, they had surprisingly little in common.

Jolted fully awake, Hatten straightened and yawned, pushing back his expensive white Stetson. Black hair grew to a point on his forehead, and his bold brown eyes were tinged with yellow. Kirk Hatten had strong handsome features, a charming if slightly insolent smile, and an easy assurance of manner. The gray suit looked as if it had been custom tailored for his compact body.

"We should of stayed over in Denver, Clary," he remarked. "That Charmion gal was really somethin'. There won't be anythin' like that in Butte."

"They say Butte's quite a town, Kirk."

"But what about the women?"

"In a rich town like Butte you'll find plenty," Parnell said indifferently.

Kirk Hatten glanced at him with impatience and faint hostility. Theirs was never a full, easy friendship, in spite of all they had shared. There was always a cool reserve, a little uneasiness between them. Parnell didn't approve of Hatten's skirt-chasing and endless conquests. Kirk was intolerant of Clary's dreamy detachment and long thoughtful silences. But they respected one another as fighting men.

Hatten lit a cigar. "How do you figure the setup in Butte?"

"The Copper Combine's havin' trouble with the independent outfits," Parnell said, in his slow soft voice. "Maybe they've lost some gunfighters and need us for replacements." There was a hint of self-derision in his tone.

"You gettin' sick of hirin' out your guns, Clary?" demanded Hatten mockingly.

"Maybe. Though I never had much luck at anythin' else."

Hatten laughed. "You're too serious, boy. It's better than pushin' cows for thirty a month. Better than skinnin' mules or drivin' stage, too. What else do you think we're fitted for?"

"That's the answer, I reckon." Parnell loaded a stubby black pipe. He was built longer and leaner than the other, with a loose, lithe lankiness about him. The hair under his flat-crowned black hat was a tawny bronze, sun-streaked to gold, and his eyes were gray-green in a lean, sharp, angular face. The black broadcloth suit was old and worn, in comparison to Hatten's rich gray, yet Parnell had a clean look that transcended clothing and travel-stains. He looked younger than Hatten, though they were about of an age.

IN THEIR middle twenties, they were veterans of the so-called Harrold War in New Mexico, the Graham-Tewksbury feud in Arizona, cattle-and-sheep warfare in Wyoming, and various less publicized campaigns of frontier strife. Their holstered Colts and shell belts lay on the opposite seat, and their Winchesters were on the rack with their saddlebags. They were on their way to join in another fight, involving the copper interests of Butte, Montana. Now that gold and silver had run out there, Butte Hill was being exploited for its copper deposits.

Hired guns, hired killers. But Clary Parnell had one consolation. Thus far he always had fought for the side he believed was right, and he never had killed except in a fair fight.

"Who's the main opposition up here?" inquired Hatten, who invariably left such details to his companion, while he concentrated on the pleasures of the bars and dance halls.

"The G-P Mine," Parnell said. "Owned

by Tom Garry and Joe Pensinger. They've come up with some new method of processin' the ore that's really got the Combine worried."

"I wonder if we'll meet any old friends?"

"Probably."

"Well, I hope it don't take too long," Hatten said.

"Homer Boguson said it was a short job." Parnell did not like that name nor some of the things he had heard about the big representative of the Copper Combine. But it wasn't fair to judge a man by his name, or to be prejudiced against an organization that called itself a Combine.

Butte was before them now, veiled by black smoke from the engine stack, and soon they were shuddering to a jarring stop at the station. The two men buckled on their gunbelts, hauled down their carbines and saddle gear, and swung off onto the blackened platform. It was late afternoon with the sun flaring red above the Continental Divide in the west. Butte was raw and crude but booming with life. They saw the "Richest Hill on Earth," its shattered mass piled with mine dumps and buildings, laced with tracks and trestles and roadways, silhouetted with gaunt skeletons of gallows frames.

A foul smell came from the mills and smelters, and fumes of sulphur and arsenic blew in from the open roasting pits. Kirk Hatten crinkled his nose and looked about for the nearest saloon. Clary Parnell gazed back at the red-painted coaches of the train and wished for some reason that he had not disembarked here. He had a strange evil premonition about this job.

There was no one to meet them. It wouldn't do for Homer Boguson to expose his hand, of course. Loiterers stared with furtive curiosity at the new arrivals. They were both big, rangy young men, with faces and hands weathered to deep mahogany, eyes squinted against sun and wind. Dressed like townsmen, they had the look and the stilted grace and the saddle gear of

riders. Low-slung Colts in tied-down sheaths, high-heeled half boots, hats with flat crowns and broad brims, double-rigged saddles. Gunfighters from the Southwest,



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decided the more alert onlookers, imported by the Combine or the G-P Mine.

A hack bearing the legend *Hotel De Mineral* and drawn by two Morgans, waited at the end of the platform. An old driver in a rusty clawhammer cutaway beamed at them from his high box. "Welcome to Butte, gentlemen. It's a mile high and a mile deep."

Parnell grinned at him, and Hatten asked: "What's that mean, Pop?"

"The Lord put it a mile above sea level, and man dug it a mile below the ground."

"And gave it a hundred-mile stink," added Kirk Hatten.

The driver smiled and nodded. "It sure do smell. A sinkhole of sin and corruption. Climb aboard, gentlemen. My name is Higby."

The thick dust under their feet was peppered with cinders, and the sparse grass plots were soot-blackened. The few trees about were stunted and acid-eaten. Butte and the country around it looked blighted and diseased, an ulcerous blotch on the face of Montana. They rode across the depot square and up the street, getting out with their luggage in front of the hotel porch. Parnell was paying the driver when Hatten said, "Look at that for a young filly!"

Parnell turned with a grin, knowing he didn't mean a horse.

A BOY and girl in their late teens were driving down the street in a bright-varnished buggy behind a pair of sleek matched buckskins. They were laughing together, their hair blowing, their clean young faces flushed happily under the tan.

"Pensinger gal and the Garry boy," the old driver said. "Nice young folks."

They made a fine couple, Parnell thought, but Hatten was seeing only the girl in the first budding bloom of womanhood.

She had rich chestnut hair, lustrous with coppery highlights, and clear carved features, their patrician purity relieved by the laughing mouth and roguish eyes. Her

figure was slender, graceful, yet ripely curved. The look in Hatten's eyes was reflected in other men's faces all along the dusty thoroughfare.

Young Scott Garry pulled the buckskins in toward the rack before the *Hotel De Mineral*, and two men stepped out from the plank sidewalk. The burly towering giant stood at the horses' heads, and the squat hunched man ambled toward the girl's side of the rig, arms akimbo. Loathing showed on Lorraine Pensinger's fine face as she snatched the whip out of its socket on the dashboard.

"That big Ox Cheatham and little Froggy Sandbo," muttered a nearby loafer. "They'll go too fur one a these days."

Kirk Hatten had already dropped his gear and was moving forward with catlike quickness. Clary Parnell lowered his baggage, except for the Winchester, levering a shell into the chamber and holding it loosely under his right arm. The two men out there wore double-holstered gunbelts and were obviously professionals. If they were baiting the Garry and Pensinger kids, they must work for Boguson's Copper Combine. But Parnell didn't care, and for once he didn't blame Hatten for walking straight into trouble. Parnell had seen too many characters like Cheatham and Sandbo. He'd been fighting them most of his life, in fact.

Hatten said something and Ox Cheatham wheeled from the horses and lunged into a double draw. Hatten struck lightning fast with his fist, the blow sounding as solid as a cleaver on the chopping-block. Cheatham's large head jerked back, his great bulk lurching after it. He fell against the rearing buckskins, and they drove him stumbling forward until he pitched headlong into the dust.

Frog Sandbo was spinning to draw on Hatten. Parnell fired the carbine into the dirt at Sandbo's feet, spraying his warped legs with gravel as Lorraine Pensinger snapped the buggywhip inches from his froglike face. Scott Garry hauled his team

back and around, with the girl cracking the whip over the buckskin rumps, and the buggy leaped into motion and rolled away in a dustcloud. Frog Sandbo was still stumbling backward when Kirk Hatten reached him with a wicked right hand and dropped him to the ground. Hatten flipped his Colt out and stood watching the two fallen men.

Parnell heard nothing behind him until a deep voice spoke in his ear and a gun barrel prodded his spine. "Keep that rifle pointed down and call off your friend. We're on the same side this time, Clary."

Turning his head slowly, Parnell saw Croft Keltie smiling there at his back. A big man, perfectly proportioned, well-dressed and superbly sure of himself. His hair was graying beneath the narrow-brimmed hat, his black mustache neatly trimmed above the expressive mouth. A man of impressive dignity and serene poise. A killer who had fought on the opposite side from Parnell and Hatten in times past.

"You got off on the wrong foot here, friend," Keltie said. "Those two men are on our team, too."

"You never did pick 'em too good," Parnell said. "Haven't they got anythin' to do but scare a couple of kids?"

"Just having a little fun, Clary. Call Hatten back here. Get your stuff inside, and I'll see you in your room."

Clary Parnell nodded. "You're givin' orders—for the time bein'. Bring up a bottle when you come, Croft."

He called to Kirk, and Hatten walked toward them with mild surprise in his amber eyes at the sight of Keltie. He couldn't see the gun in Clary's back, but he guessed it was there and holstered his own. Keltie removed the chilling pressure from Parnell's spine and moved out to where Cheatham and Sandbo were stirring in the dirt.

"So we get another crack at Croft Keltie, eh?" said Hatten, as they gathered up their gear to mount the steps.

Parnell shook his head. "We're supposed to be workin' with him. Or for him."

"And them two rannies?" Hatten glanced back at the street. "I'd rather work with a nest of rattlers." Then he brightened. "But, say, wasn't that gal a beauty though?"

"Pensinger's daughter," Parnell told him somberly. "And the boy's Tom Garry's son."

Kirk Hatten whistled softly. "Some set-up, huh, Clary? Somethin' stinks here besides the copper mills, I reckon."

"I had a feelin' it was goin' to, Kirk."

IN THEIR room Parnell and Hatten were stripped to the waist, Clary shaving and Kirk washing up, when Croft Keltie came in with a beefy man who had the pompous bearing of a politician. Homer Boguson smiled with flabby lips, and lifted his hammertail coat as he sank into the room's only comfortable chair. Keltie produced bottle and glasses and poured drinks.

Boguson gave them another oily smile. "Too bad you boys had that run in with Cheatham and Sandbo. But I imagine Croft can keep them in line."

"He don't have to on my account," Hatten said, lathering his face at the mirror.

"They're a bit uncouth," Boguson admitted. "But good solid boys nevertheless. We don't want any internal dissention, of course."

Parnell pulled on a clean shirt, accepted the drink and a cigar from Boguson, and sat down on the edge of the bed. "What's the deal?"

"A couple of men have to be—uh—eliminated." Boguson wet his fat lips. "An outside job is preferable, and Croft recommended you boys."

Hatten grinned under the razor. "Too tough for your own gunnies?"

"Not exactly. But our men are known here, and we want to keep them here for future protection. You boys can do the job, collect your money, and disappear at once. And it can't be traced to the Combine."

"Just like that," drawled Parnell. "And the victims?"

"You'll know when the time comes," Keltie said. "You don't have to know until then."

"Must be big men." Parnell puffed on the cigar. "We could probably guess."

Croft Keltie smiled at him. "You're a smart boy, Clary. But this is one time it won't pay to be too smart. Or do too much guessing. You understand?"

"No," Parnell said flatly. "I don't understand. And I don't like it."

"It smells," Hatten said, washing off lather and grabbing a towel. "Like everything else in Butte."

Homer Boguson shifted on his enormous haunches and angrily pursed his full lips. "I thought you said these men could be relied on, Croft."

Keltie smiled soothingly. "They're just putting on an act, Homer. It doesn't mean a thing."

"We never did murder, Croft," said Clary Parnell. "And this sounds like murder to me. We only go against fightin' men."

"These men'll fight, don't worry," Croft Keltie said. "They're not easy by any means. One of them grew up fighting on the frontier. The other one recently blew a man's head off with a shotgun."

"But they aren't gunmen, are they?"

"They use guns—what's the difference?" Keltie was beginning to lose a little of his customary icy composure. "Do you want the job or not?"

Kirk Hatten, finished with the towel, walked over with his slight natural swagger and picked up his drink. "We'll think it over." He went back to the mirror and combed his glossy black hair.

"You're in a bit deeper than you realize, boys," Keltie said. "Ox Cheatham and Frog Sandbo are already after you, and we have a couple more men you might have heard of—Dude Fayard and Spanish Mafera."

"Don't scare us, Keltie," jeered Hatten.

Croft Keltie started to reply, but Homer Boguson restrained him with a pudgy white

hand. "This childish argument gets us nowhere, Croft. We don't have to stoop to threatening these fellows. Either they take the assignment or they get out of town."

Clary Parnell smiled into his whiskey. "It's nice to have everythin' decided for you. No problems, no headaches."

"I'm a busy man," Boguson wheezed. "Let's arrive at some decision here. I want your word, one way or the other."

"Give us a few hours to think it over," Parnell said. "Until after supper."

"All right, all right." Homer Boguson heaved ponderously out of his chair. "Think it over, boys, and we'll see you this evening. My offer is a generous one, I believe. Where else could you make a thousand apiece so easy? If you're wise, you'll see it through with us." There was a veiled threat in his words and his wet-lipped smile.

Croft Keltie didn't bother to screen his threat. "Now that you're here," he said quietly, "you really have no choice in the matter."

When the door closed behind them, Clary Parnell drawled: "So that's that, Kirk. Either kill or get killed."

"It's Pensinger and Garry they want blasted, isn't it?" Hatten thoughtfully poured himself another drink.

"Sure."

"What we goin' to do, Clary?"

"I don't know—yet." Parnell's bronze head shimmered as it turned in the lamp-light. "In order to stay alive and get the real lowdown on things here, I guess we'll have to string along with them—for awhile, at least."

CHAPTER 2

Deadline—for Murder

THEY had eaten well in the Hotel De Mineral dining room, with appetites whetted by travel and whiskey, and smoked their after-supper cigars. They had pledged themselves to the Copper Combine,

accepted an advance from Homer Boguson, and they didn't feel at all happy. But it seemed the only way to delay a shootout and learn the facts of the situation in Butte. Parnell and Hatten weren't going into this thing blind, not on either side. They would be under constant and suspicious surveillance by the Combine's gun-sharps from now on, and watched just as warily by the Garry-Pensinger forces. They were caught squarely in the middle.

In the evening they wandered about the town and visited some of its oddly named saloons and cafes: the Graveyard, Frozen Inn, the Cesspool, and the Dirty Name. What they overheard at the bars confirmed their feeling that they were on the wrong side this time. The Copper Combine alone employed hired gunmen. Garry and Pensinger were honest business and family men, striving to defend their holdings against heavy and ruthless odds. There had been killings on both sides, but G-P hadn't brought in any professionals, although they invariably got the worst of it.

The other independent companies had been forced out of business, going under and selling out cheap to the Combine, or simply shutting down and pulling out of Butte. But Garry and Pensinger held on somehow, in spite of the shootings and the mysterious accidents that killed workmen and crippled production. Log trestles were burned down, or collapsed suddenly under loaded ore cars, and tracks were undermined and uprooted. Pumps failed and tunnels were flooded, and a few miners were drowned. Timbers gave way and men were crushed under rock falls. Fires broke out deep underground and cave-ins followed, entombing entire crews. It was a heart-breaking struggle, and Tom Garry and Joe Pensinger had aged ten years in the last one.

As Parnell and Hatten listened, without seeming to hear or care about anything, their blood began to boil. Always before they had taken the weaker side, and their

sympathy was with the underdog. They knew they never could serve the Copper Combine, work for men like Boguson and Keltie. The problem was how to break with the Combine, and at the same time stay alive to help Garry and Pensinger. For those two men and their lifetime work were doomed, unless the fighting arm of the Combine was smashed at once.

With the restless Hatten acting as pilot, they took in a show at the Comique and then drifted into the labyrinth of saloons and hellholes along Mercury Street. They were followed wherever they went, and finally they spotted the two men trailing them. A bleach-haired girl, for whom Hatten was buying drinks, identified the pair. Dude Fayard was dressed like an Eastern dandy. Spanish Mafera looked sly and reptilian, and wore a braided Mexican jacket. They were both deadly killers, the woman declared. Human life meant less than nothing to them. Dude Fayard recently had shot a G-P timberman to death in front of his wife and children. Spanish Mafera's latest victim was an eighteen-year-old G-P laborer, stabbed to death in the backyard of the Pink Elephant.

Hatten wanted to call them right there, but Parnell prevailed upon him to desist. As soon thereafter as possible, Parnell extricated Hatten from the bleached blonde's clutches and dragged him back to the more civilized part of town, which was gaudy and noisy enough in itself.

They were having a nightcap, or several of them, in the Hotel De Mineral barroom, when a stocky man with mild, faded blue eyes turned to them. "Pardon me, gentlemen, but I'd like to stand you a drink. I'm Tom Garry. I believe you did a favor for my son and his companion this afternoon."

They shook hands with him and assured him that it had been a privilege for them. While they were drinking, a tall lean man with the figure and bearing of an ex-cavalry officer joined them. Garry introduced him as Joe Pensinger, friend and partner. Pen-

singer insisted on buying the next round. Parnell was glad to meet the G-P owners, but he feared this might go on far into the night, and Hatten was already fired up to the verge of one of his bar-wrecking moods.

Pensinger, perhaps because of his lovely daughter, seemed to have a sobering effect on Hatten, and they went to talking about various subjects while Garry and Parnell discussed the copper situation in Butte. It was bad and getting worse, Garry admitted. No telling how much longer they could hold out against the pressure of the Combine.

"It's the same old story," Tom Garry said. "We pioneered the copper field here, along with other small operators who have been driven out. Now this big syndicate, backed by Eastern financiers, is taking over everything. It happened to the pioneer ranchers, and lumbermen, too. The land-grabbers and big money interests get it all in the end."

"That's the way it works," Parnell agreed. "The men who fought the Indians and rustlers and trail-drove the first herds up from Texas seem to have been squeezed out. I know, Mr. Garry, because my father was one of them."

THE four seemed to get along well from the first. Both Garry and Pensinger were men that you warmed to, liked and respected almost instantly. Gentlemen of intelligence and courage, without any sham or pretense. It was easy to see how they produced children like young Scott and Lorraine . . . They reminded Parnell of his own dad, killed five years before by the hired guns of a cattle syndicate similar to this Copper Combine.

After a final round and invitations to visit the G-P Mine and the mutual home they shared for protection, Pensinger and Garry said good night and started for the outside door. Garry had a hand on the batwing, Pensinger at his heels, when Spanish Mafera lurched drunkenly out from between two tables and rammed into Pensinger,

who shouldered the man roughly away.

Mafera spat out something that ended in, "*gringo dog!*" As Pensinger moved toward him, a knifeblade flashed with sudden magic in Mafera's hand. Pensinger halted, eyes fixed on the steel as it flickered toward him. Then Parnell saw Dude Fayard cross toward Pensinger's back.

Kirk Hatten's right hand whipped up smoothly, and flame burst from it with a roar that rattled glasses and set the lamps to wavering. The knife spun in a dazzling arc and clattered off a table, and Spanish Mafera stood staring stupidly at his broken forearm. Then, as Fayard lifted his right arm to gunwhip Pensinger from behind, Clary Parnell caught his wrist and yanked Dude over backward. Dude landed on his shoulderblades, head bouncing on the floor.

Still gripping Dude's wrist, Parnell hoisted Fayard bodily to his feet, snapped him about and hit him in the face with a lashing left fist. Driven back toward the bar in a rapid jerk-legged stagger, Dude Fayard was groping for his left-hand holster when Kirk Hatten's gun barrel chopped across his skull, knocking him flat and senseless on his back.

Clary Parnell motioned Garry and Pensinger on outside, and bent to pick up Fayard's revolver, while somebody led the moaning Mafera out in quest of a doctor. Turning to the bar, Parnell saw Croft Keltie and Homer Boguson in the entrance from the lobby. Keltie had a gun trained on Kirk Hatten's back.

Swiftly Parnell brought up Fayard's weapon. "Don't try anything, Croft!"

There was a tense hushed moment, and then Keltie smiled dimly, shrugged, and holstered his gun. Nodding at Hatten, Parnell thrust the Dude's gun into his waistband and sauntered forward. Hatten turned with him, and the four men met at the lobby end of the bar.

"What's the meaning of this anyway?" demanded Croft Keltie.

"Ask your two monkeys," Clary Parnell

said. "And keep them off our necks after this, Croft. We don't need an escort around town."

"What happened? - What started it?"

"Spanish was goin' to slip a knife into Pensinger. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?" Parnell smiled thinly.

Homer Boguson swore weakly. "That Spaniard's crazy! We should get rid of him and that knife of his, Croft."

"You're pretty friendly with Pensinger and Garry, on short acquaintance," Croft Keltie accused, bottomless black eyes probing the two men in front of him.

"What's wrong with that?" Parnell asked. "There's no harm in getting in good with the other side, Croft. We're in solid now and everything's working out fine. If you'll keep your gunnies off our back."

"He's right, Croft," Boguson agreed. "They're doing it the best way, as far as I can see. This incident tonight will put them in stronger than ever with G-P."

"I don't know, Homer," said Keltie dubiously. "Something's off color here."

"That tie you're wearin' maybe," suggested Kirk Hatten. "Look, Keltie. If we're goin' to do this job we've got to have a free hand."

"Yes, and I say give it to them," Boguson said.

Croft Keltie gestured in disgust. "We shouldn't be talking here, you fools! Break it up and meet in the room, if there's any more talking to do. I'll bring the Dude to, and give him a little advice to pass on to Spanish. This outfit's going to hell in a hack, ever since these two cowboys blew in."

He moved into the ring of men around Dude Fayard, while Boguson leaned his bulk against the bar and mopped his round red face with a silk handkerchief. Parnell and Hatten walked away into the lobby, grinning at one another when they were out of view.

"We're gettin' lucky, Kirk," Parnell drawled. "This may not be as bad as it

looked first off, boy. It may work out."

"It's about time," Hatten grumbled. "Everythin' went wrong on that last job in Missouri."

"We'll look the mine over tomorrow. And maybe the old homestead, too."

"The old homestead for sure!" Hatten said, his yellowish eyes lighting up. "That little Pensinger gal's for me, Clary."

Parnell shook his head. "You won't get anywhere there, Kirk. She's a lady."

"I've met ladies before. They ain't so different from the others."

"They're nice people and she's just a kid. You lay off her, Kirk, or I'll bend a gun on your noggin."

Hatten's amber eyes flared quizzically.

"You think you could, Clary?"

"Maybe," Parnell murmured.

Hatten grinned and clapped him on shoulder. It was something that never had been tested or proven one way or the other. Something they always wondered about at odd moments, an unsettled question that nagged in the back of their minds. They both hoped it would never come to a showdown between them. They weren't exactly afraid of each other, but there was a lot of mutual respect there.

Later, Croft Keltie came up to their room. "If you're calling on G-P tomorrow," he said, "there's no sense in mincing words or wasting time. Tom Garry and Joe Pensinger are your men, and there'll be an ideal opportunity when they're showing you through the mine. Here's four-fifty apiece, which makes five-hundred you've each received in advance. The balance will be left at the desk in your names."

"What about the law?" inquired Parnell.

"Don't worry about it. We've got the sheriff under our thumb." Croft Keltie smiled with cool menace. "All you've got to worry about is the Combine. Don't think for a minute you can doublecross us and get away with it. Tomorrow is Wednesday. Starting at six in the morning, we'll give you thirty hours. If the job isn't done by

Thursday noon, you'll die along with Garry and Pensinger."

Parnell started to protest, but Croft Keltie shut him off. "No arguments, Clary. There it is on the line. Do the job and we pay you off and everything's fine. Don't do it, and you pay us—with your lives. Thursday at twelve noon is the deadline. That's all."

CHAPTER 3

The Pensinger Filly

IN THE morning, dressed comfortably in range garb, Parnell and Hatten threw their saddles and gear onto livery-barn horses and rode out to the G-P Mine. They were still chilled by the cold-blooded ruthlessness of the Copper Combine, and the pressure of time was already bearing down on them.

Kirk Hatten was wearing his double sheathed belt with the matched set of horn-handled .45 Colts. Clary Parnell never packed but one gun, a walnut-gripped .44 that took the same shells as his Winchester saddle-gun. To Clary, wearing two irons seemed showy and pretentious and asking for trouble, but on Kirk he had to admit they looked right.

At the office, Garry and Pensinger greeted them cordially, thanked them for last night's intervention. While they had some Arbuckle coffee, Joe Pensinger explained briefly the problems and processes of mining, smelting and refining copper. Then they inspected the nearby roasting pits and smelters and revolving vats.

"The common ore here is sulphurated and compounded with arsenic and antimony," Pensinger said. "It has to be roasted to rid it of impurities, and then smelted in a solution of copper and iron sulphides. The resultant copper sulphide still contains iron, lead, and other impurities. In that big rolling vat, which we designed ourselves, compressed air is blown through the metal

to get rid of undesirable elements and purify the copper."

They mounted a gouged and slag-heaped slope, with a network of tracks and trestles and gallows frames that threw skeleton patterns of shadow over the ore dumps. The shaft house stood at the summit. Here they entered a rickety cage and were lowered slowly into the black smothering depths of the earth. Parnell began to feel short of breath and panicky. Glancing at Hatten in the pale yellow lanternlight, he saw that Kirk looked pale too. He wondered how men could work under these conditions. A man might as well be dead as doing this for a living.

Later on, as he grew somewhat adjusted to this weird subterranean world, Parnell lost some of his terror in watching the miners at work. There was fear here, as there had been outside at the pits, mills and smelters, though it was not the fear that Parnell and Hatten felt in a strange new habitat. But it was equally as tangible. You could smell and taste it. It was, Parnell realized, the fear the Combine had put in these miners.

Working for G-P made them marked men. On or off the job, there was no real safety for them. Enemy agents were on the payroll, alert for opportunities to sabotage the works. No telling when a cable might snap, a crossbeam give way, fire or flood sweep the tunnels. If a man didn't die in these contrived "accidents" in the pit, he was apt to be challenged and shot to death in town by the professional killers of the Combine. It was a terrible and hideous thing to be hanging over men who were just trying to make honest livings for themselves and their families. It was bad enough to work in the mines, without having the Combine like a cocked pistol at your head.

As they explored the underworld depths, sweating under that eternal pressure and panting in the foul air, there were times when it would have been simple to destroy Tom Garry and Joe Pensinger and make it

appear accidental. A millrace of oily black water in a flooded level. A sheer drop-off into a dark abyss that seemed bottomless. A rockslide from a splintered sagging support, a ladder come loose, a dropped sledge or pick from overhead. Most of the time they were alone with Pensinger and Garry. It would have been easy.

It would be the easiest way out for Kirk and me, thought Clary Parnell, and knew immediately that it would be anything but that. It wasn't like killing in open combat or face-to-face duel. A man's conscience would torture him the rest of his life. No, there wasn't any easy way out, but the best, the only way, was to go against Keltie and his trained killers. That would save not only Garry and Pensinger, but protect their employees and their families. It was as worthy a cause as a man could hope to lift a gun for.

It was a relief to get back on top of the ground and breathe open air again, and Parnell and Hatten both confessed as much.

"You'd get used to it in time," Garry told them.

"I sure hope I never have to," Parnell said.

"Me, too," muttered Kirk Hatten. "I don't mind smotherin' in a saloon, but a mile underground is too damn far!"

Joe Pensinger laughed. "You boys'll accept our invitation to dinner, I trust?"

"Why, sure," Parnell said, rather shyly. "We don't travel in polite company too much, but—well, we're much obliged to you."

Pensinger scrutinized them steadily. "We like you boys, but there's one thing that troubles us. Although you've tangled with a couple of the Combine boys, we understand you're quite friendly with Boguson and Keltie."

"We knew Keltie from way back, though we were never exactly friendly," Parnell said calmly. "Ran into him the first thing here, and Croft felt like talkin' over old times."

"I hoped there was some satisfactory explanation, Clary."

"All I can say is we're on your side, Mr. Pensinger."

"Call me Joe, Clary. It makes me feel younger," Pensinger said. He hesitated a moment, then smiled. "Would you boys consider working for us?"

"Don't figure on bein' around long," Clary Parnell murmured. "We may do a job of work for you before we pull out, though. But you won't have to pay us for it."

THE house shared by the Garrys and Pensingers was large and solid, though not at all elaborate. It stood on a rise of land about a mile outside of Butte, with a big barn and long low sheds behind the main building, and a horse corral. White and yellow pine and Englemann spruce shaded the spacious grounds, the only real trees left in the vicinity.

Lorraine Pensinger and Scott Garry came out to the barn while they were unsaddling. They were delighted to meet their rescuers and talked with youthful enthusiasm about yesterday afternoon's encounter in front of the hotel.

The boy was frankly worshipful of Kirk Hatten. The girl, oddly enough, seemed more interested in Clary Parnell, and he discovered that her eyes were a rare gray-blue color, brimming with life and dancing lights, deep enough to drown in. The contrast between Lorraine's pure proud profile and her merry mouth and reckless eyes fascinated Parnell, but her attention embarrassed him. As for Hatten, he was obviously annoyed that she seemed to prefer his partner.

In the house they met the rest of both families, and had a drink before sitting down to the large, well-laden table. It was the finest meal Clary and Kirk had enjoyed in a long time. The company was pleasant and friendly; the women as well as the men made the strangers feel fully at home. Clary

Parnell was suddenly lonesome for the family life he had known in boyhood, aware of the emptiness in the aimless roving existence he and Kirk were leading. A man needed roots, permanence, people who loved him, a home of his own. Not at twenty-six maybe, but he would later on. . . .

After dinner, Tom Garry and Joe Pensinger returned to the mine. They had extended an invitation to Parnell and Hatten to stay the afternoon and evening. Lorraine and Scott seized upon this to suggest a horseback ride, which was agreed upon with eagerness by Hatten and some reluctance on Parnell's part.

Saddled up and setting forth in the brassy afternoon glare, Lorraine Pensinger promptly paired off with Clary Parnell, ignoring Kirk Hatten and young Scott as if they didn't exist. Kirk grew sullen and irritable, short with the boy, who was like a friendly puppy. Clary Parnell was troubled. They had enough problems without the added complication of this lovely young girl.

With a lot of plotting and planning to do, Parnell was silent at first, but gradually Lorraine drew him out in spite of himself. She was smart and sophisticated at eighteen, and she had charm as well as a strong physical attraction. Not inexperienced with women, Parnell could tell that this girl was truly interested in him, for some unknown reason. Hatten, the one that women generally noticed, didn't appeal to her, and she regarded Scott Garry as a brotherly friend more than anything else.

Before Parnell was conscious of it, he was talking about himself and his family and the places he had seen that were only picturesque names to her. Austin, El Paso, Abilene, Dodge City, Tombstone. . . .

They were back at the house, and strolling under the pines after supper that evening, before Clary Parnell realized two things with utter dismay. He was in love with Lorraine, and he had arranged no program for dealing with the Copper Combine.

Nearly half of their allotted thirty hours was already gone.

Sensing his withdrawal, Lorraine turned to face him, her burnished head tilted back and her eyes lifted. The pure line of her throat and chin was breathtaking in the shadowy dimness. "What's the matter, Clary? Something is bothering you, isn't it?"

Parnell took a deep breath. "This is no good, Lorraine. Let's go back to the house."

The girl moved a little closer, her eyes searching his face.

"Clary, don't be afraid. I—I knew the moment I saw you on the hotel steps. I've waited all my life for you, Clary."

"All eighteen years?" he chided gently.

Her smile flashed. "Never mind, old-timer. Women grow up fast in this country."

Parnell shook his head despairingly. "You don't know anythin' about me, Lorraine," he said. "I'm not meant for a girl like you. It wouldn't be fair. . . . I've got to talk to your father now." He started for the house, but she barred the way with her firm pliant body.

"No, Clary, I won't let you go!"

Parnell looked down at her clear face and full sweet mouth raised to his, and suddenly he took her in his arms. His lips met the softness of hers, and then he was lost and uncaring. The wonder of it shook him, seared him. This was what Parnell needed above all else. They were meant for one another, destined for this blind union. . . .

But no, he had killing to do, and there was no room in a killer's life for a girl like Lorraine Pensinger.

Wrenching out of her grasp, Parnell held her at arms' length, speaking through the taut, dry ache in his throat. "Lorraine, it's wrong. It can't ever be. . . . I'm goin' to see your father."

She turned away, shoulders quivering. It wrung Parnell's heart, but he wheeled and left her there under the pines and the wide starry sky.

JOE PENSINGER didn't look surprised to see him. "I thought you might have something more to tell me, Clary," he said quietly.

"Yeah, quite a lot," Clary Parnell said. He was going to cut himself off from Lorraine and her father and families like the Pensingers and Garrys. It had to be done; it couldn't be avoided. "You 'probably figured us for gunnies?"

"Well, we had an idea you might be, Clary. But I've known some good men who were gunfighters."

"The Combine brought us here," Parnell blurted, wanting to get it out and over with quick. "But we couldn't stomach the set-up, once we saw what it was. To stall for time and keep from gettin' shot in the back, we made believe we were goin' along with 'em. They—they wanted us to—" He couldn't go on.

"They wanted you to kill Tom and me, didn't they?" Pensinger said, without emotion.

Parnell nodded dully. "We—we never intended to do it, but . . . Well, we've got to figure somethin' out fast."

Pensinger dug his bootheel into the ground. "I guess my daughter's in love with you, Clary."

"She—she thinks so, maybe. But I told her it was no use."

"As to that, who can say?" mused Pensinger, frowning at the starshine on the roof. "We'll see, in time. There are other and more immediate things, if any of us are to live through this. Did they set a time limit?"

"Tomorrow noon," Parnell said. "If you and Tom aren't dead by then, they're goin' to kill all four of us. Or try to."

"The best bet would be to make them think Tom and I are dead," Pensinger said thoughtfully. "That'd give you and Kirk more of an even chance."

"Yes, but how?"

"I think we can figure out some way," Joe Pensinger said evenly. "We'll get together with Tom and Kirk in a minute.

First I'm going to see Lorraine. She no doubt thinks her heart is broken forever and the world's coming to an end tonight."

"Too bad you folks got mixed up with guys like Kirk and me," muttered Parnell, the bone structure of his face standing out bleakly.

Pensinger smiled at him. "I wouldn't say that, Clary. Especially since maybe you're going to save our lives."

Parnell bowed his head gratefully, but he was not consoled. A man might talk that way, but he still wouldn't let his daughter marry a gunfighter. Not that Clary blamed him. If he had a daughter, he'd feel the same way. Morbidly he watched Pensinger walk away.

Kirk Hatten came off the veranda steps with an arrogant swagger and stood with boots planted wide and hands on hips, grinning tightly at Parnell. "So the real ladies go for you, friend? I never realized what a swath you cut with the women. The high class ones, I mean."

"Cut it out, Kirk," said Parnell wearily. "Haven't you got enough trouble?"

"You showed me up good today, didn't you? We're goin' to have it out sometime, boy. You and me to the finish!"

"I didn't make any play."

"No! You just stand off and they come a-runnin' to you." Hatten's eyes glowed yellow and menacing.

"Let it ride, Kirk," Parnell said.

Kirk Hatten hung quivering on the brink of striking out with his fists, and Parnell braced himself. Kirk finally relaxed with a snort.

"All right, brother! We'll let it go now. But after we clean out those tinhorns from the Combine, you and me'll have it out! It's been buildin' for quite a spell." He turned abruptly and strode back up the steps onto the porch.

Clary Parnell watched him go with worried eyes and a hollow sense of loss. On the eve of their hardest battle, this had to come up between them and break them apart. As

if the odds weren't bad enough already. . . .

CHAPTER 4

Ghostly Avengers

A SKELETON crew kept the G-P smelter grounds and mine alive by night, with riflemen on guard about the boundaries and at strategic points inside. With the Copper Combine operating against them, it would have invited disaster to leave the works unguarded.

It was about ten o'clock that night when owners Garry and Pensinger rode up to the office building, accompanied by the manager and foreman, and Parnell and Hatten. The sentries and workmen were not surprised, for the officials often made nightly tours of the plant. After a casual pause at the office, the horsemen continued up the slope to the mine entrance. Racking their mounts there, they entered the shaft house and the cage to be lowered into the mine.

An hour later whistles broke into a mournful scream. Bells began to clamor in wild alarm, and men rushed up the hillside toward the main shaft. Miners from neighboring works began to infiltrate, all rivalry abandoned in such emergencies, and the dread word spread like prairie fire until riders and wagons were racing out from the streets of Butte. *Accident in the G-P Mine.* It filled the night world and emptied the saloons and gambling dens and dance halls in town. As common as death was here, it still claimed universal attention.

The manager and foreman came out of the shaft house carrying two tarp-rolled bodies, and laid them gently in the flat-bed wagon which had been summoned up from below. Garry and Pensinger themselves had been caught in a cave-in on the sixth level. Two more dead were buried down there, their bodies not yet recovered.

The wagon started creaking and rattling down the winding drive with its dead, men on foot trooping after it. Many a grimy,

beard-stubbed face was streaked with tears, and men cursed hoarsely as they trudged along. Tom Garry and Joe Pensinger were the last of the good ones. With them gone, a miner'd be nothing but a slave for the Combine. Time to move out and travel, head somewhere else, for with Butte Hill completely under the Copper Combine, no self-respecting man could stand working there.

It was the end of an era, the last of the pioneer owners gone under, and Butte copper was in the hands of Eastern capitalists and bankers. On the spot, Homer Boguson would reign supreme, backed up by Croft Keltie and his crew of gunmen. With the death of Pensinger and Garry, two real and regular square-johns, Butte itself was dying. The death wagon clattered downgrade with groaning axles, and the men behind it swore and spat thickly and moaned into the night breeze.

Emerging from a sidehill tunnel mouth below the summit, Clary Parnell and Kirk Hatten watched the lantern-lit procession with an eerie feeling. "I don't like this play-in' dead," Hatten grumbled. "It's liable to come true on you."

Parnell didn't favor it either, but it seemed an essential move in their course of action.

When the straggling column disappeared in the darkness, Parnell and Hatten climbed to the top after their horses, observed only by the shaft house employees and guards, who were in on the scheme. Exchanging sober salutes and winks with these men, Parnell and Hatten swung into the leather and rode off on a roundabout route toward the lights of Butte.

"It's a game to them," growled Hatten. "They ain't got to go up against the worst bunch of gun-slicks in these parts."

Parnell was silent, still trying to plot the remainder of the campaign.

Word would reach town ahead of them. The Combine should have no reason to doubt that Garry and Pensinger were dead,

but it was likely to question the death of Parnell and Hatten. They ought to be able to go to the hotel and pick up their money and things without interference; Parnell thought. But there was the possibility that the Combine figured on doublecrossing them all the time, even if they did do away with the G-P owners.

But it didn't really matter. Boguson's tough crew had to be wiped out. Garry and Pensinger were safe only as long as the Combine thought they were dead. And the G-P Mine and its workers wouldn't be secure until Keltie and his killers were under the ground.

Parnell thought of Lorraine with a pang of anguish. It wasn't easy to play noble and walk out on a girl like that, particularly when she was the girl you'd been hunting for all your life.

They took a back way into Butte, leaving their horses behind the Hotel De Mineral and entering by the rear door. The lobby seemed deserted except for the gray-whiskered clerk behind the desk, and Spanish Mafera, his right arm bandaged in a sling, leaning indolently on the counter. When they came in from the darkened dining room, the clerk gaped as if seeing ghosts, but Mafera didn't seem at all surprised. The clerk shook his head when Parnell asked for the envelopes left in their names. Mafera smiled toothily and gestured with a brown cheroot.

"Do not worry, my friends. Señor Boguson and Señor Keltie will deliver in person."

"Where are they?" asked Parnell.

"Out to the new company smelter. They will be in soon on the work train. There is no cause for worry." He fingered his tiny mustache.

"We can't hang around here," Hatten protested.

Mafera's smile broadened. "Why not, señors? The sheriff is in the mountains, hunting the elk. The company train will be in any minute now. No cause for alarm."

He fairly exuded good will and friendly cheer, regardless of his wounded arm.

"Let's get a drink, Clary," said Hatten, stalking toward the entrance to the barroom. Parnell followed, his gray-green eyes flickering back at Spanish Mafera. The hotel saloon was empty save for the bartender, and he gazed at them with astonishment.

"Never expected to serve you two boys again, but it's a pleasure!"

Shortly after they moved into the barroom, Dude Fayard came through the front door of the lobby and beckoned Mafera away from the desk. Spanish jerked his thumb toward the saloon and walked to meet his dapper confederate. "They're in there, Dude."

"Good," said Fayard, with a frozen grimace of a smile. "They had the bosses fooled but not the Dude! Pensinger and Garry aren't dead, Spanish. They're as alive as we are!"

Mafera crossed himself with his good left hand. "Santa Maria! You've been drinking the green stuff again. That absinthe rots the brain, as I told you many times."

"They're alive, I tell you! That Mex houseboy we planted out there saw them after they were brought home in a wagon."

"What do we do, Dude? They'll be meeting the work train."

"We'll wait outside and take 'em when they come out," Fayard said. "They won't meet anything but bullets, Spanish. I hope you're as good as you claim with that left hand." They went out the front door together. . . .

A FEW minutes afterward the old coachman, Higby, rose from a deep leather chair in the dark shadows at the front of the lobby, and shuffled outside into the street.

Parnell and Hatten were finishing their second drink when the old man came through the swing-doors of the side entrance.

"You sure look mighty live and healthy for a couple dead ones," he said. "I'm glad it's so, but they's a pair waitin' outside for to fix that different. Them same two you was ruckusin' with in here last night."

"Where are they, Higby?" inquired Parnell.

"You gentlemen come this way," he said, hobbling toward the lobby, with Parnell at his shoulder. Hatten hesitated long enough to buy a bottle of Higby's favorite brand and strode after them. "I got the carriage hitched up out back to meet that Combine train. They got the front covered pretty good, but ridin' out with me you could kinda get beyond 'em like."

And that's the way they did it. Fayard and Mafera, posted in the shadows on either side of the alley mouth, took little notice of the cab clattering out into the street. Until it slowed, turning toward the station, and Parnell and Hatten stepped out on the far side.

Hatten called: "You two-bit tinhorns lookin' for somebody?"

Startled and panicked, the Combine gunmen whirled and drew, but the Colts of Parnell and Hatten were already lined and leaping aflame, jetting bright and loud across the street.

Parnell had targeted on Fayard, and the Dude rocked back into the store window, glass splintering and crashing in brilliant shards as he pitched forward, clawed at a barrel, and sank into stillness under the awning. Hatten's slugs drove Mafera against the hotel porch, spun him off and dropped him writhing on his back in the alley.

Racing after the hack, Parnell and Hatten climbed aboard again, out of sight and away before the people came pouring out of doorways to swarm around the bodies of Dude Fayard and Spanish Mafera.

Higby parked the carriage in depot square and climbed stiffly down. Accepting the bottle with solemn dignity, he passed it for a round of drinks.

"Liked you boys when you come in," he said. "Liked the way you went after that big Ox and little Frog. Then I heard you was here for Boguson and Keltie, and I didn't know, couldn't figure it. But it's all plain now, and I should of knowed from the start. Well, boys, I reckon there'll be some more shootin' when this train gets in?"

"I reckon," Parnell drawled.

"They'll be four big ones and lots of little ones on that train."

Kirk Hatten grinned at him. "That'll make the odds just about even for us, Higby."

But Clary Parnell was more practical. Two men, no matter how good they might be, couldn't fight an army. It would be sheer suicide to call Boguson and Keltie in front of a trainload of Combine men.

"The big ones ride with you, Higby?" he asked.

"That's right. Boguson, Keltie, Cheatham and Sandbo."

Those four were the ones they wanted, the backbone of the Combine. With them gone the war in Butte would be ended, to all intents and purposes, for the underlings wouldn't carry on without leadership. Somehow they had to separate the big four from the rest of the pack.

"These Morgans ever run away, Higby?" inquired Parnell.

"Not on their own accord. With a little persuadin' they might."

"Could you persuade 'em?"

The old man inclined his head. "I can make 'em do most anythin' except climb trees."

Parnell studied the square and diverging streets. "Run 'em the other way, Higby, away from town. And maybe you could wreck the rig a little, without hurtin' it too bad?"

"I know just the place, out on the edge of town. Nobody much around there. There's a stone water trough where the street turns sharp right. Takin' that curve

I can sideswipe into that trough, hang the old coach up on it for you."

"We'll be there waitin', Higby," said Parnell.

"I'll deliver 'em right on the spot," promised the old man.

The rails were humming and the earth was vibrating with the distant approach of the train as Parnell and Hatten left depot square and walked away from the center of Butte toward the western outskirts. . . .

ON THE incoming work train, they already had heard about the tragedy in the G-P Mine, for a Combine courier had ridden out to the new smelter site. The deaths of Garry and Pensinger seemed authentic enough, since they were expected, but Croft Keltie couldn't believe that Parnell and Hatten had died with them. Homer Boguson, a fat cigar in his plump wet lips, said: "No, that'd be too good to be true."

Keltie said nothing, but secretly he hoped Parnell and Hatten were still alive. He wanted to get them himself, especially Kirk Hatten. He always had marked those two for his own meat, sooner or later, and to-night he was going to take them.

Ox Cheatham, massive and bull-like, still bore the mark of Hatten's fist on his heavy countenance, and Sandbo's head was banded where Hatten's gun barrel had gashed it. They were primed and ready to go after Hatten and Parnell. Even the beefy Boguson was cradling his cutdown shotgun.

"At the station we'll get off on the opposite side," Croft Keltie announced. "Just in case Parnell and Hatten are hangin' around with ideas in their heads."

The work train rumbled and groaned to a jolting stop, disgorging thirsty workmen bound at once for the barrooms. Keltie's party descended into darkness on the far side of the tracks, cinders raining on them, smoke and steam blurring the colored lights along the right of way. They walked back around the caboose and crossed to the platform where the hotel hack awaited them.

A man panted alongside with the news that Fayard and Mafera had just been shot to death outside the De Mineral by unknown assailants.

Croft Keltie calmly masked the inward wrench that gave him. It must be Parnell and Hatten; nobody else would dare to face the Dude and Spanish.

Higby seemed to be having trouble with his horses. As they climbed into the carriage, Ox Cheatham swore at the old driver.

"Shut up, Ox, and keep your eyes open," Keltie ordered. "If somebody killed the Dude and the Spaniard, they'll be out to get us too."

The hack backed jerkily around, the Morgans acting up, plunging and rearing strangely. Higby headed his team into the street finally, but all of a sudden the horses leaped and broke into a full runaway gallop. The cab rocked and swayed crazily after them, tossing its occupants about in heaving confusion. On top the driver was sawing the reins and shouting, but the Morgans raced on with undiminished speed.

"He's goin' the wrong way!" howled Cheatham, as the lights gave way to the blank blurred walls of deserted buildings on the western rim of Butte. . . .

Clay Parnell and Kirk Hatten, sitting on the crumbling steps of an abandoned building near the stone watering trough, smiled gravely as they heard the hammering hoofbeats and rattling wheels of the oncoming coach. Higby had the horses at a headlong gallop, but still under his masterful control, as they hurtled along the dark empty street. Parnell and Hatten stood up and spread apart, waiting under a decayed wooden awning, their eyes narrowed keenly and their hands ready. Parnell wished for once that he carried a second gun, or had his Winchester along.

With a shriek of axles the hack rocketed into the sharp curve, leaning, bucking and yawing wildly behind the runaway team, and they glimpsed the white flash of the old driver's teeth as he brought the Morgans

around with sure skill. The horses cleared the trough, but the carriage slewed wide and crashed sideways into it, smashing to a halt with the tearing splintering impact of wood against solid stone. Higby now held the horses down with an iron hand and a soothing voice, the shattered cab overhanging the broad rock trough with dust boiling and surging high into the night air.

OX CHEATHAM staggered out first, cursing furiously and raising his right-hand gun toward the driver's box. Kirk Hatten's voice lashed out:

"Over here, big boy!"

Cheatham whirled with ponderous speed, swinging the gun in his huge paw, but Kirk Hatten showed him the fastest double draw he would ever see, and blasted the Ox with both hands. Cheatham's gun went off into the ground as he doubled, whirled in a ragged arc, and fell face first into the tall rear wheel, clawing at the spokes and slumping to his knees, sprawled there in monstrous stillness.

Fire tongued from the cab and lead slashed the shadows. Frog Sandbo came out shooting, an evil warped form with guns flaring in both hands, and windowglass crashed behind Parnell and Hatten as they lined and let go at him. The flames speared to and fro across the street-corner; the reports blended in a thunderous roar. Driven back against the panels, Sandbo bounced off and went down twisting and thrashing.

But beside Parnell, Kirk Hatten was down on his knees, white Stetson rolling in the dust, his fine dark head bowed against the awning post. Parnell turned to crouch over him, but Hatten gestured and swore disgustedly:

"I'm all right. Get the rest of 'em, boy!"

He held out his left-hand Colt. Parnell took it and turned back to the carriage, standing in a spread-eagled stance before Hatten. Bullets seared past and tugged at his clothing, ripping wood in the background.

Croft Keltie, somehow out on the far side

of the cab, opened fire from the rear wheel, and Parnell felt the scorching suction of lead as he flung himself into the street, rolling under the muzzle-lights, throwing swift shots at Keltie's legs beneath the carriage. Hit and hurled clear of the back end, Keltie folded and dropped him in the dust. But he scrambled around, his gun blazing along the ground.

Clary Parnell rolled again and hammered another shot at him. Keltie heaved with the smash of the .44 slug, struggled to his knees and fired blindly, then collapsed abruptly with his hawk-face in the gravel. Clary drilled another bullet into him just to make sure.

Spitting dirt and blinking wetly, Parnell clambered upright just as Homer Boguson, who had been momentarily stunned by the collision, blundered out of the cab with his sawed-off shotgun. Higby struck with his whip from the box then, slashing it wickedly around Boguson's fat face and thick neck. The whip yanked him backward so that the shotgun was jerked high, both barrels exploding skyward with a tremendous bellowing blast that filled the entire night world. Parnell's thumbs caught and held his gun hammers.

Lunging forward, Clary Parnell clubbed a gun barrel over Boguson's head. He wanted Homer Boguson alive to do some talking.

In the sudden quiet, Higby climbed down with his bottle, and they walked back to where Kirk Hatten lay, still clinging to the foot of a half-rotten post. Hatten grinned at them, and reached a hand weakly for the bottle.

"Hell, no, I ain't dead yet. Us Hattens take a lot of killin'." He drank deeply and smiled with satisfaction, his face handsome even under the powdergrime and sweat and pain. "We did a pretty good job, the three of us."

Parnell went on reloading, with .44's from his belt for his gun, and .45's from Kirk's supply for the matched pair of Colts.

"Yeah, but we better be movin'," he said. "It sounds like some more Combine hands are on their way out from town."

The Combine men never got beyond depot square, because Tom Garry and Joe Pensinger, risen from the dead, with a full mounted and armed force from G-P, overtook and turned back the Combine men. Then they rode on out to find Clary Parnell and Kirk Hatten and Higby, with the wrecked carriage and three dead Combine leaders and the unconscious form of Homer Boguson.

Tom Garry, an expert in such matters, took over the dressing of Hatten's wound, and Joe Pensinger said: "I hope you boys'll stay with us awhile now. We'll certainly need you if the Combine sends in any more gunmen."

"Well, we'll have to hang around until Kirk's able to travel anyway," Parnell admitted.

"We'll take him out to the house. He'll get the best of care there. We owe a great deal to you boys, Clary." He reached out and quietly shook Parnell's hand. "You'll find we're not ungrateful."

Hatten grinned up over Garry's shoulder.

"If I have Lorraine for a nurse, I never will want to get well. And she never will look at that towheaded stringbean of a Clary again!"

Suddenly, amazingly, Lorraine Pensinger was there, clinging to Parnell's arm. "I'm afraid you're wrong there, Kirk," she murmured softly, her fingers finding Parnell's arm.

Hatten didn't look either abashed or dismayed. "Well, that's life, I reckon. And I'm such a nice fellow too." He grinned cheerfully at Parnell. "Go on and kiss her, you fool!"

Clary Parnell, breathing in her clean fragrance, gathered the girl in his arms. He knew that her father accepted him fully now, and that Kirk Hatten held no ill-feeling. The day he had landed in Butte, he decided, was just about the luckiest day in his life.

The Copper Combine was broken here. There'd be no more created accidents in the mine, no more murders in the saloons and streets. The G-P employees could work and live in peace. . . .

Parnell held the girl close and smiled down at Kirk Hatten.

THE END

BAD TROUBLE AT BENNET'S

By Max Kesler

"I'd be a dead hero any time, before I'd be a dead coward!" Kim Bennet swore, when he saw his oilman dad give way with the rest of the wildcatters before the advance of the crew whose battle-cry was "Blood—and cows!"



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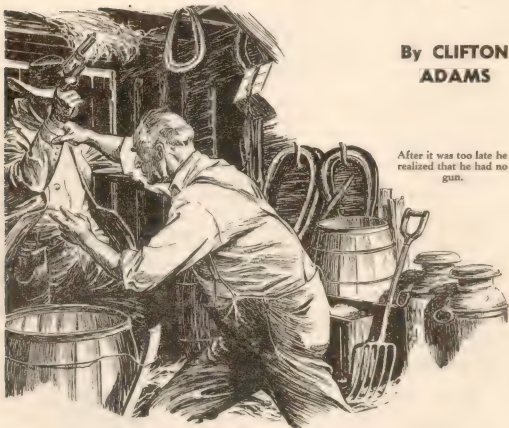
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MAGAZINE

—SATAN'S STEP-SON—

By CLIFTON
ADAMS



After it was too late he realized that he had no gun.

THEY gave Huck Ballard a new dark suit, a pair of prison-made shoes and a narrow-brimmed hat to go home in. The warden gave him five dollars of the State's money and a hearty handshake. "I can't say I'm sorry to see you go, Huck," he said. "Behave yourself and I won't see any more of you."

Huck grinned. "That suits me just fine." The guards took him across the front yard, a place the prisoners were not allowed to go, to the big iron-barred gate. Huck Ballard stepped on the other side of the gate, breathing free air for the first time in twenty years.

There was a prison supply wagon going

★ *It was a hard choice Huck Ballard faced: to let twenty years of living hell all go for nothing—or ask for twenty years more.* ★

to town, but Huck declined the offer of a ride. He swung briskly down the center of the dusty road, his coarse dark coat over his shoulder. "By God!" he thought. He filled his lungs until they ached and hammered himself on his chest. . . .

The town of Huntsville drowsed lazily under a blazing Texas sun. Huck stopped the first man he met and said, "Which way to the stage office, friend?"

"The what?"

"The stage office. Didn't you ever hear of a stagecoach?"

The man gave him a queer look. "Mister, there hasn't been a stagecoach in this town for five years! If you want to go somewhere, you better go down to the railroad station."

That was when Huck Ballard began to understand that he had walked into a strange new world.

He walked all the way across town without seeing a single man wearing a gun. "Now that's a hell of a thing," he thought. "Back in 1879 a man'd sooner be caught without his pants than without his gun."

But this wasn't '79, it was '99, a fact that Huck Ballard found hard to believe. . . .

"One way to Masters Cutoff," he told the stationmaster.

"Where?"

"Masters Cutoff," Huck said again, very distinctly.

"Just a minute." The stationmaster checked through some charts and tables laid out on his desk. "You mean Carter's Junction," he said. "Name was changed ten years ago when they formed a township. That'll be six twenty-two."

"Hell's afire!" Huck Ballard said. "I'll walk it!"

He would have too, if a tinker's wagon hadn't come along and given him a ride as far as Broken Arrow Creek.

"Times sure change," Huck said by way of conversation.

"I reckon," the tinker admitted. "How long you been locked up?"

"Twenty years and six days. Say, how'd you guess I been in the pen?"

The tinker spat across the rump of his spavined mule. "Them clothes. There ain't but one place in the world you can get clothes like that. The Texas State pen."

At Broken Arrow Creek Huck caught a freighter's wagon to Big Prairie. Masters Cutoff—Carter's Junction, rather—was only about six miles off, across country, and Huck decided to walk that remaining distance.

It was rough going through the brush. The hard leather of the prison shoes chafed and rubbed Huck's feet. As he worked up a sweat, the narrow-brimmed hat began to come apart. "Nothing but cardboard!" He flung it into a creek and sat down to cool his aching feet.

"Twenty years," he thought. "Damn, it's been a long spell."

But he had something to come back to; that was more than the other cons at Huntsville could say. He lay back on the creek bank, his feet dangling in the water. He grinned.

"Fifty thousand dollars," he said aloud. "And I know right where to put my hands on it!"

It was well into the afternoon when he first sighted Carter's Junction. "Well, it hasn't changed much," he thought with relief, "even if they have changed its name and made it a township, whatever that is."

The town was still the hodgepodge of frame buildings that he remembered. The old stage road looked untraveled, as did the cutoff that the Butterfield stages used to take on their way to San Antonio. Only to the east of the town had any noticeable change occurred during Huck Ballard's long absence. There the bright twin ribbons of the railroad lay, and down the road a piece stood a tall, red-painted water tower. Involuntarily, Huck's eyes were pulled around farther east, to where Lonesome Creek wound its way through a cool grove of cottonwoods. He was tempted to

go right there and make sure that the money was still where he had put it.

"It's still there," he told himself. "Nobody knows about it but me." He hobbled down the grade toward Carter's Junction, with visions of cold beer in his head.

HUCK had been in the Corner House Bar no more than fifteen minutes when a voice asked, "You Huck Ballard?" He looked up from his beer and saw that the words had come from a kid of twenty-four, maybe twenty-five. He had a town marshal's star pinned on his left shirt pocket and a Colt .45 on his hip.

Huck said soberly, "Don't tell me I already broke a law, on my first day out."

The kid marshal was all business, no humor. "I think we better talk," he said.

Huck had had vague hopes that in the space of twenty years people would have forgotten about him. But that, he supposed, was too much to hope for—for a man who had once been a member of the Basset gang. He picked up his beer and went over to a table, the kid following.

"What do you want?" Huck asked.

"Fifty thousand dollars," the kid answered.

Huck was jarred. "How's that?"

"The money you and the Basset boys took back in '79, when you hijacked a bank shipment from the Harrington Express Company."

"Now look here, son," Huck said with righteous indignation. "For twenty years I been bustin' rocks up at Huntsville because of this thing; don't you think that's all the pesterin' a man ought to get for just one mistake?"

The kid marshal said sternly, "It was a pretty big mistake. I might as well tell you, Ballard, that this isn't the way I would handle it if I had my way. I'd just sit tight and wait for you to dig up that money, wherever it is, and then I'd grab you and put you back in Huntsville for another twenty years."

The thought chilled Huck. The beer was suddenly bitter. He said uncertainly, "Hell, son, I don't know nothin' about no fifty thousand dollars."

The marshal didn't believe him. The Bassets were dead, had been killed by a posse, and the only man who knew where the money was was Huck.

The kid said, "I'm going to get you, Ballard, or I'm going to get that money." He got up and left.

Huck had another beer to settle his nerves. He hadn't expected anything like this; he'd figured just to pick up the money and drift down to Mexico or some place and live out the rest of his years in comfort. "Damnation!" he thought. "How'd I ever get into this mess, anyway?"

He had asked himself the same question a lot of times, during the long years at Huntsville, and had never arrived at any satisfactory answer. Twenty years ago he had been just a kid—a kid like the new marshal, he thought—and it had seemed like a good idea at the time, throwing in with the Bassets. He had learned better. After it was too late.

"But hell's afire!" he exclaimed to himself. "All that's over and done. Didn't I serve my time? Didn't I pay for makin' a damnfool mistake?"

There were few people in Carter's Junction that Huck remembered, although he had lived all his life in the town—all except the twenty years and six days at Huntsville, of course. Well, he thought, he'd better figure out what'd be the best thing to do. He counted his money. Four dollars and seventy cents.

"I better think of somethin' pretty quick."

He spent a dollar of his money for a day's room and board at the White House Hotel. Mrs. Harrington, a mild gray-haired, gray-eyed woman of about sixty, ran the place, with the help of her daughter, Beth.

There was a brief, unpleasant surprise

in store for Huck at supper that night. The kid marshal, he learned, was also a boarder at the White House. And it didn't take a mind-reader to see why—the way he and Beth Harrington kept making eyes at each other.

AFTER dark Huck sauntered down to the Corner House again and squandered twenty cents on a drink of rye whiskey. It wasn't as if he didn't have the money. After all, there was fifty thousand dollars just waiting for him to pick it up. "Well, what's holding you?" he asked himself.

Nothing, he decided. The marshal was nowhere in sight—out squirin' the Harrington girl around, probably. Huck sauntered out of the Corner House and drifted up the street toward the railroad tracks. Darkness soon swallowed him and he quickened his pace toward the water tower. From there, he thought, I'll just cut across the fields and head on down toward Lonesome Creek and pick up . . .

He stopped. An uneasiness took hold of him. He could see nothing, could hear nothing, but somehow he knew that he was being followed.

"A nice night for a walk," a quiet, sober voice said.

The kid marshal slid out of the shadows of the water tower and came toward him.

"Why, yes," Huck said. His voice sounded a little shaky. "Never get enough walking. That's something they didn't go in for back in Huntsville."

He turned and headed back toward town. Maybe the kid stayed where he was. Maybe he followed. Huck couldn't tell.

The next night Huck tried again to get down to Lonesome Creek, but again he had that feeling that he was being followed, and he turned around and came back.

"This is goin' to take time," he thought. "What I've got to do is settle down and get a job and wait for my chance."

The next day he started looking for a

job, but he soon learned that the thing wasn't going to be as easy as he had expected. They would look at him and say, "Ain't you John Ballard's boy?" They didn't add, *The one that used to ride with the Basset gang*, but that was what they meant.

They would shake their heads when Huck admitted he was. "Nope, we don't need no help today."

In two days Huck's money was gone. He was sitting on the White House porch, wondering if he could rake up enough nerve to ask the hotel to stake him to another day or so, when old lady Harrington came out.

She said, "I understand you're looking for a job, Mr. Ballard."

"Yes, ma'am," Huck said, rising. "I sure am."

She smiled. "It just happens that I can use a drayman. Do you know about horses and such?"

"I sure do," Huck said happily.

Mrs. Harrington, Huck learned in the next few minutes, owned a couple of dray wagons and a small bunch of horses, along with the hotel. "They were left by my husband," she said, and let the subject drop.

That day Huck was hired on as a drayman, hauling small loads of freight and express to the nearby towns that had not been touched by the railroad. It did not strike Huck strange that Mrs. Harrington should give him the job. She seemed to like him, and he turned out to be a good drayman, so the arrangement seemed to be fine for everybody. It was the kid marshal—whose name was Clay Henderson—who jarred him with the unexpected information.

The marshal was waiting at the livery corral when Huck came back from his first haul to Prairie City.

"I see you've decided to go slow and take your time," Marshal Clay Henderson said.

Huck frowned. "I don't know what

you're talkin' about. I'm workin' at an honest job. Why don't you let me alone?"

The kid said, "Does the name Harrington mean anything to you, Huck?"

"Sure. Old lady Harrington gave me this job." Then, out of nowhere, a thought hit him. It hit him low, in the stomach, the kind of a blow a man is apt to get in a rough and tumble alley fight. The kid smiled faintly.

"That's right, Huck. The Harrington Express Company—remember? Old man Harrington owned one of the largest fleets of express wagons in this part of Texas, about twenty years ago. Do you know why his widow is running a rundown boarding house for a living?"

Huck felt slightly sick.

"Because you and the Basset boys robbed them of fifty thousand dollars," the marshal said relentlessly. "Oh, it wasn't their money, but they had to make it good to the bank. It broke the company. These two sorry dray wagons are all that's left of the Harrington Express, thanks to you and the Bassets."

This was a shock, and Huck Ballard couldn't entirely believe that the marshal was telling the truth. "What're you tryin' to do?" he demanded angrily. "Why, the old lady gave me the job herself!"

"That's because she's a woman," Clay Henderson said dryly. "Oh, she knows you were in on the robbery, all right, but in her woman's twisted way of thinking she blames herself for the twenty years you spent at Huntsville." For a long while he just looked at Huck. "Don't you think you ought to get that money and give it to her?"

Remembering those twenty years brought cold reality back to Huck. "Let me alone!" he shouted. "I don't know anything about that money!"

Huck skipped supper that night and went straight to his room. "I got to think of a way to get that money and get out of here!" he told himself. "That marshal

means to get me, by hook or by crook."

He understood now why the kid was so set against him. The marshal, the girl, the old lady, they were all in it together. He snorted. Nobody did favors for nothing. He could see the old lady's scheme now—trying to get on the good side of him just so she could find out where the money was. Well, she was in for a surprise, because Huck Ballard could play the game right along with them.

"I can wait," Huck thought. "I can wait till the Rio Grande freezes over!"

TWO weeks went by and Huck was beginning to feel right at home on that dray wagon. He took his first week's pay and bought a wide-brimmed hat to replace the one he had thrown away. The next week he bought a pair of cotton pants so he wouldn't have to wear the prison suit all the time, and he found himself planning ahead to the time when he could afford a pair of good boots to replace his prison shoes. Then he thought, "Damnation! What's wrong with me? Here I am practically the owner of fifty thousand dollars, and I'm worryin' about a measly pair of boots!"

He didn't make any more attempts to get down to Lonesome Creek. Not while that kid marshal was in town! But sooner or later the marshal would have to leave town, and that would be Huck's chance.

Meanwhile, everything was going along fine. The folks in Carter's Junction began to loosen up and speak to him as he drove the big dray wagon down the main street. "Howdy, Huck!" And Huck would grin, standing spread-legged and solid on the jolting flat bed of the wagon. He was beginning to enjoy himself. "Hell," he thought, "I can wait 'em out from now on, if I have to."

The showdown came sooner than he expected. It happened one night after he got in late from a run to Prairie City, as he walked from the livery corrals toward the

White House. There were lights in the front parlor of the hotel, which was strange since most people in Carter's Junction went to bed by nine o'clock.

Something told Huck to stop, to wait a minute before he went bustin' in on anything. He listened, picking out Mrs. Harrington's voice (the old lady sounded tired, Huck thought), and the kid marshal's voice, and another voice that was unfamiliar to him.

Buck slipped around to a big side window to have a look at what was going on. The unfamiliar voice, he saw, belonged to a lawyer named Parkman, and he was saying, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but that's the way things stand. The hotel has been losin' money right along, and just two dray wagons don't bring in enough money to make up for it."

The marshal looked mad about something. The girl, Beth, looked like she was about to cry.

"Mrs. Harrington," the kid was saying, "I tell you there's no reason to let the bank take over everything you're got, if you'll just listen to reason!"

The old lady shook her head.

"Why don't you listen to Clay, Mama?" the girl pleaded.

The lawyer nodded agreement. "If the marshal knows a way to get the money, ma'am, I say let him do it. The bank has been lenient, but there are limits."

"I tell you I can make Ballard take me to where the money's hidden," the marshal said, his voice cracking. "He's as stupid as a dirt squatter. Why, I could trick him into it this very night, if you'd just give me the word, ma'am."

Mrs. Harrington shook her head again. "No, I won't have a man wasting his life away in prison on my account. Anyway, I'm not convinced that he's not telling the truth. Why, I never had a better drayman."

The marshal snorted angrily.

The girl said, "Clay!"

Huck didn't listen to any more of it. He stumbled away from the window and leaned against the rough weatherboarding of the house. "Hell's afire!" he said hoarsely.

The argument went on for several minutes. When the marshal came slamming angrily through the front door, Huck guessed that the old lady had talked him down. Soon the lawyer left. The parlor lamps were turned down and blown out. At last the marshal came back and went to his room, after walking off his mad spell.

Huck still didn't move. He wondered if the marshal was sleeping—he never seemed to sleep, except when Huck slept. Maybe, Huck thought, he was being watched this very minute. It didn't seem at all likely, but he couldn't be sure.

"He said he could trick me into taking him to the money," Huck thought. "What did he mean by that?"

Inwardly, he knew that the kid could do it. Huck had never been very long on smart thinking. The marshal could tie him into knots if he ever took it on himself to do it.

Thoughts dashed recklessly against the sides of Huck's mind. "What am I going to do?" He thought briefly of Mrs. Harrington. "Now there's a woman for you, crazy as a catful of bats!"

He tried to get mad, but he seemed to have used up all his anger. He looked up to see if there was a light in the marshal's room. There wasn't. Asleep probably. The guy had to sleep sometime. Huck shifted and scuffed his shoes in the soft dirt of a flower bed. "Oh, hell!" he said, and started walking off toward the railroad tracks.

IT TOOK him almost an hour to find the place where the money was hidden and dig it up. There were two heavy saddlebags, some of the money in gold and some in government greenbacks. He slung the saddlebags over his shoulders and plodded back toward Carter's Junction.

"Now if I had a horse," he thought, "I

could be way to hell and gone before anybody woke up and found out I'd pulled out." Then he thought, "What's wrong with me? I'm a drayman, I got all the horses I want waitin' down at the livery." He chuckled softly. "Say, it looks like I finally give that kid marshal the slip!"

He came into town the back way, around by the railroad's water tower. On the outskirts of town he sat down in some deep shadows to rest a spell. "Now let's see," he thought, "the first thing I got to do is go around to the harness shed and pick up a saddle. Then I'll rig up a horse and that's the last'll be seen of Huck Ballard in Masters Cutoff—Carter's Junction, I mean."

After a while he got up, slung the saddlebags again and headed for the harness shed near the livery corral. The thing was to keep in the shadows and not be seen—not that anybody was likely to see him this time of night, but there was no use taking chances. So he circled wide around to come up behind the shed. In the pale light he could see the white lettering in the shed. *Harrington Dray Lines*. All that was left of the Harrington express company, and from what the lawyer had said, the dray line wouldn't be here long.

Huck felt bad about stealing a saddle and horse from the old lady, but he thought, "Hell, she's goin' broke anyway. If I don't take them the bank will." Still, it wasn't going to be much fun, after all she had done for him.

He kind of wished he hadn't heard that conversation earlier in the night. He wasn't used to people doing favors for him. It made him uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, he was just about a hundred yards from the shed, fully intending to take the saddle and horse, when something stopped him. He saw something move past the shed window. It wasn't a shadow; there was nothing to make a shadow.

Somebody was inside the shed. The shed door opened and a saddle hit

the ground with a thud. More leather equipment followed it. Huck was stunned. "Robbers!" he thought. "Damnation!"

Thoughts whirled in Huck's mind and made him panicky. He thought, "I got to get out of here, find me a saddle and horse somewhere else. If that feller sees me, likely we'll wake the whole town up runnin' from each other." He surprised himself not by moving back, but forward.

"Now that's a lowdown thing to do!" he thought with unreasonable anger. "I never did lean to sneak thieves that did their robbin' in the night. And from old ladies, at that!" He was up against the shed before he realized that he still had the saddlebags over his shoulders. He set the saddlebags down on the ground.

He leaped through the door yelling, "Robbers! Robbers!"

After it was too late he realized that he had no gun. He dashed full into a saddle rack, and it dazed him for a moment. He heard a voice yelling over and over and guessed vaguely that it must be his, but he seemed powerless to stop it. "Ah!" Huck grunted as his hands grasped something that felt like an arm.

Huck figured later that it must have been a gun barrel that hit him, but at that moment it felt like a mountain falling on him. The darkness was suddenly lighted with a bright flash of pain, and that was the last he remembered for some time.

LATER—Huck didn't know how much later—he began to come out of it. He was sprawled on the floor of the shed; the kid marshal was standing over him.

"I want to apologize, Huck," the marshal said. "I never figured you'd willingly bring that money to Mrs. Harrington."

Huck was still dazed; his head hurt. He said, "What?"

"Of course," the kid said, "I knew you were outside that window tonight, listening to what we were saying—a bunch of horses couldn't have made much more noise

than you did. I was hoping you'd see how the old lady needed the money and turn it over to her. But I didn't figure you'd do it. So I followed you."

Huck said, "You did?"

"Well, most of the way. I lost you down on the creek, so I came back to saddle my horse and look for you. I guess you forgot that I kept my saddle in here with the draying harness, so when you saw me you took me for a robber. When you charged me I knew you weren't trying to get away with the money."

Huck remembered an old saying that went: "No one has a memory good enough to be a good liar." That was the way Huck felt now.

He said wearily, "You don't need to apologize, son. Right up to the last I meant to get off with that money."

As he said it he knew that he wasn't telling the kid anything he didn't already know.

The marshal shrugged slightly. "But you threw everything up when you thought Mrs. Harrington was being robbed. I don't think you would have gone far, Huck. I think your conscience would have turned

you around and brought you back. "You make a lousy outlaw, Huck!"

The marshal had introduced a lot of new ideas into Huck's already bewildered brain. It was something he had never thought about. For twenty years he had thought of that money and what he was going to do with it, but now that it was gone, it didn't make much difference.

After a few minutes he asked, "Are you arrestin' me?"

The marshal shook his head. "Why should I arrest you?"

Huck thought about that, not getting anywhere with it. At last he got to his feet. "Well, I guess I'll be goin'. I been runnin' on the same track for a long time. It looks like I better go off somewhere and try to figure out where it's takin' me."

"When you get it figured out," the marshal said, "come back to Carter's Junction and a job will be waiting for you."

Huck walked into the darkness, away from the shed, away from Carter's Junction. He walked with a slight limp which became more pronounced as the miles fell behind. His prison shoes hurt his feet.

"Damnation!" he said.

There was a fighting anger in Blaze Farragut that demanded blood. But on that feud-torn range, where one side had branded him "coward" and the other "killer"—for which side was he to fight?

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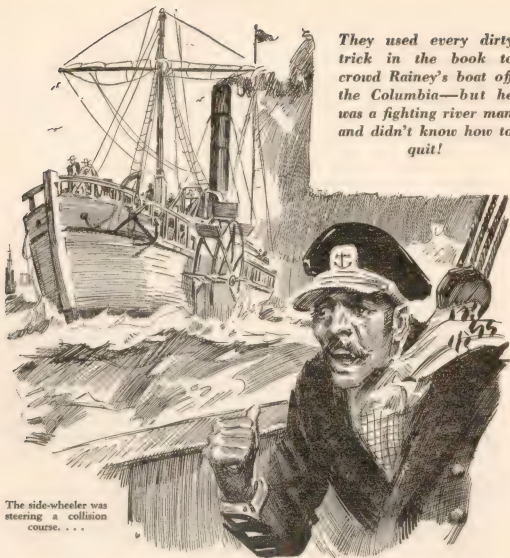
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They used every dirty trick in the book to crowd Rainey's boat off the Columbia—but he was a fighting river man and didn't know how to quit!

The side-wheeler was steering a collision course. . . .

RIVER MAN'S BOOTS

By GIFF CHESHIRE

THE mate held the *Upstart's* prow to the bank while Rainey Scott jumped off. It was a devil of a way for a boat captain to have to go ashore. Not that anybody looking for river color would have picked out Rainey as one of its top-

flight skippers. He was a little hombre even when boiling mad, as he was now. He went up that bank like a fly up a wall, his arms out and his fists balled.

Storm clouds stretched across the sky above Dalles City, spilling a cold rain that

pelted the dockside and the town beyond it and the great bare headland yet farther back. The gorge wind crinkled the water of the river all the way to the rock cliffs on the far shore. Through most of a depressing day, the *Upstart* had breasted that water, coming up from the Cascades. It had passengers eager to feel earth under their feet, however slippery, and it had a lot of freight to unload before morning. But it was short a wharf.

Once on the road, Rainey Scott sloshed boldly through the mud toward Jess Vines' freighthouse and office. He could hear the rattle of the handtrucks unloading the big *Challenger*, which had hogged the landing. Rainey vaulted onto the street platform of the dock building and headed for a door at one end. The door had a window that was too dirty to let him see if anybody was in the office. Often a girl was in it, a slim and tiny girl who made Rainey feel like a giant.

She wasn't there now, but her father was. Jess Vines was also a small man, but with more of the type's cockiness than Rainey displayed. He was seated at an untidy desk with his hat on. His chair was turned so that he could rest his boots on the window ledge and watch the river he made his living from. He swung his head and looked at Rainey, but that was all.

There was another man present, in a chair that was tipped against the wall. Though young, he was big and wore a boat officer's blue cap and coat. His cheeks were heavy, his eyes small and unblinking, the eyes of a truculent and unfeeling man.

"Since when," Rainey demanded of Vines, "has the *Challenger* had the right to center-tie on your landing and hog the works?"

Vines considered that. "Since now," he said finally.

"Which answers your question," Morg Gatling said. "Now you can get out of here. Me and Jess are talking business."

"So I wait till you get that gaudy tub of

yours out of the way, do I, Gatling?" Rainey breathed.

Gatling shook his head. "You just find yourself another landing. Jess and me have all but gone into partnership. Gatling and Vines. We wouldn't have the facilities to handle your business even if we had the wish."

Rainey couldn't keep his jaw from sagging a little.

"The portage?" he gasped.

"It all goes into the pot," Morg Gatling said and grinned. "You'll have to find yourself new portage, too, if you stay in business. But you don't have to stay in business. I've told you before I'd sooner buy you out than ruin you."

Swinging back toward Jess Vines, Rainey blazed, "This is some sudden, Jess! And some underhanded. You've never breathed a word to us! What you think I'm going to do now with all my freight and my passengers?"

Vines squirmed a little. "Now, look Rainey," he said defensively, "all I got in the world's tied up in this landing and my portage equipment. I ain't young anymore. Steam Navigation's got the big business on the river and they'll keep it. There's only room for so many independents. And it's from the independents that my living's got to come."

"In short," Rainey said hotly, "you'll string along with the outfit you figure's most apt to make out."

"In short," Jess said with a sigh, "that's about it."

"If you're teaming up with Morg Gatling," Rainey said, "I sure wish you luck." He swung around and walked out.

He tramped the length of the building and got out of sight before he let his shoulders slump. The *Upstart* was still angled in against the soft mud bank, her stern wheel turning gently to hold her there. She wasn't big, but she was a smart boat and Rainey Scott loved her. Sell her to that Gatling gorilla? Never!

RAINEY swung back aboard his packet and climbed to the texas deck. Stepping into the wheelhouse, his dark countenance told Len Farman all that the mate wanted to know.

"Gatling's pulled a whizzer," Len commented.

"Jess is going into partnership with him," Rainey said. "We've got no landing and we've got no portage to the Deschutes."

"Where we going to discharge passengers?"

"Tinker's fish landing. Then we might as well pull the corks and let her sink. That skunk Gatling offered to buy her again. Wait till I see Fancy Dan."

The mate belled the engineroom, and the little *Upstart* backed out into the channel. Then her paddles reversed, and she began to walk upriver.

The fish landing stood on above the town, a devil of a place to let off passengers and no place at all to discharge freight. But the *Upstart* put in at the landing and made fast. Her gang plank ran out, and presently a score of angry passengers had got through the heavy smells of the landing and headed off into the rain toward town.

There was no sense in putting the freight out into that weather. Rainey went to his cabin to get into dry clothes, aiming to go into town again himself. He still hadn't got his wind back from the punch Gatling had delivered. The man had started the *Challenger* on the middle river only a few weeks back, and he was sure moving fast. He had tried to buy the *Upstart* and had threatened trouble when Rainey turned him down cold. But Gatling hadn't hinted at the proportions of the trouble he had in mind.

The big Oregon Steam Navigation outfit had a virtual monopoly on the Columbia and its rich mining trade with the interior. But not quite a monopoly. A few doughty independents were making money, too. If they were tough enough, resourceful enough, skilled enough in the steamboat craft. They also went broke frequently.

The big company didn't bother with them, calling them upstarts. That was where Rainey and Fancy Dan Peel got the name for this packet. Now they had a second, on the upper Columbia beyond the long portage here at the Dalles Rapids. That was the *Sheer Lunacy*, which Fancy Dan skippered. Dan would be down on the portage train, presently, and maybe Dan could come up with an answer to this development. He was smart. He was getting established on the upper river, a reach the other independents said it was sheer lunacy to enter.

The loss of a landing here at Dalles City wasn't fatal, Rainey knew. Probably he and Fancy Dan could manage to put up one of their own somehow. The portage was a different proposition. Nearly fifteen boggy mountain miles lay between here and its upper end. Oregon Steam had a narrow-gauge railroad that handled its freight and passengers, but the independents had to freight by team and wagon. That called for lots of help and a lot of equipment. Scott and Peel had already strapped themselves putting the *Lunacy* on the upper river.

Changed into better clothes, Rainey pulled on a slicker, braved the fish landing and headed toward town. He reached the long, muddy main street and began to slog along its busy length. He was passing the post office when something tickled his heart and caused his cheeks to heat.

Nancy Vines came out of the post office, raising her umbrella. A man who didn't know better would think it was a pigtail girl under that rain cape. Rainey knew better, as did most of the unattached men in town, especially Fancy Dan Peel. She was Dan's girl, as near as could be determined, for Dan was tall and handsome, gay and clever, with the courage of a mountain lion. But of all the wonderful girls in the West, she was the only one whose diminutive size made Rainey Scott feel all man.

"Hello, Rainey," Nancy said, and he

had an idea she didn't know what her father was up to in connection with Morg Gatling. Nancy's brown eyes were clear as a June sky, clean eyes that could be watched without causing her to fidget.

Rainey had touched his boat cap, and it was a moment before he remembered to bring his hand down. Suddenly he felt empty as a deflated balloon. The change Jess was making was going to take Nancy right out of the lives of Fancy Dan and himself. Scott and Peel weren't going to be able to like Jess Vines, after the way Vines had treated them. Nancy was bound to side with her father. Something ached deep inside of Rainey. At first he thought it was for Fancy Dan, but he knew it was for himself, too. Fancy Dan could take his pick of girls and was inclined to do so up and down the river. Standing there in the pelting rain, Rainey Scott realized he had half-way hoped Nancy would come to like him half as well as he did her.

"Look, Nancy," Rainey said desperately, "how about you and me having supper tonight at the Umatilla House?"

Her eyes widened. It was the first time he had ever dared to suggest a thing like that, and maybe she figured he was setting out to cut in on Fancy Dan. Which he was. Dan often took her to supper at the sumptuous hotel. He had no trouble asking a girl for what he wanted. He liked a little competition.

"Why, I'm sorry," Nancy said. "I can't tonight."

"Dan in already?" Rainey asked, surprised. He'd seen nothing of the portage train.

Nancy shook her head. "Not Dan. I just have other plans. Bye." She smiled and turned up the street.

He moved right along beside her, surprised at his doggedness. "Did you know Jess has gone partners with Morg Gatling?" he demanded.

"No," Nancy said, yet she showed no surprise.

"You do now," Rainey said. "And he's denied the *Upstart* the use of his landing and portage."

Nancy gave him a quick, sidewise glance. "He's actually done that?"

"Would I dream it up?" Rainey asked.

"I'll be darned," Nancy said. "I knew he was thinking about it. But I didn't think he'd do it." Nancy turned suddenly toward the door of a mercantile.

Rainey got the point. She had known what was in the offing and didn't want to talk to him about it. Nancy was moving right out of the picture, along with the landing and portage. Rainey set his jaw.

THE portage train from the Deschutes still hadn't got in to the little dockside depot. But from the depot Rainey could see Gatling's *Challenger* riding arrogantly at Jess Vines' wharf. Suddenly Rainey found himself recalling what had been said in Vines' little office. "Jess and me have all but gone into partnership," Gatling had taunted. *All but*. That meant that the thing wasn't down on paper yet. Jess had as good as admitted his intentions of stringing along with the strongest outfit in what he suspected was going to become a steamboat war.

Rainey's jaw thrust forward. What made Jess figure Gatling's was going to be the strongest outfit? Without portage, Scott and Peel were as good as busted. So they might as well go busted trying to run their own portage. Rainey began to pace the wet dock planks. If he could scrape together something that would as much as pose a threat of competition to that new partnership, it might cause Jess Vines to think twice before he signed into it.

The trouble was that Scott and Peel handled freight enough to keep some fifteen wagon outfits busy all the time. Wagons, horses, drivers and helpers, barns and feed. . . . Rainey shut his eyes as he tried to figure the cost. It would take borrowed money, and they had already borrowed to the

hilt to build the *Sheer Lunacy*. But Scott and Peel had to have a landing and portage—and by damn—they had to have Nancy Vines.

The narrow-gauge came rattling around the distant bend, disappearing now and then among the giant clusters of rock. It was making connections for a couple of big Oregon Steam packets, but Fancy Dan was aboard, so suave and resourceful he could cop a ride on their big competitor's portage train.

Fancy Dan was tall and lean and brown, resplendent in his full uniform. He wore a mustache and his eyes were brown and merry. He strode up to Rainey, took his elbow, and steered for a waterfront saloon. Fancy Dan liked to cut the fog out of his throat before he ate. While they had their drink together, Rainey told him of their trouble.

Fancy Dan stroked his lean jaw, looking serious for once. "I'll be damned!" he breathed. "And I figured Jess was as good as in the family."

"We won't marry us any portage," Rainey snapped. "We're going to acquire it the hard way."

Fancy Dan shook his head. "Any way I can think of would sure be hard. You got any notions?"

"Why don't we offer Jess a partnership, ourselves?" Rainey asked. "And ask him to hold off till Gatling proves he's tougher than we are."

"That's worth trying," Dan agreed readily. "I'll talk it over with Jess when I go up to see Nancy."

"You won't be going up to see Nancy. She's busy with something else."

"No fooling?" Dan asked, considerably surprised. "Then you go see Jess, yourself, Rainey. I got an angle I'll look into, myself."

Fancy Dan used a hotel on this end of the portage. He excused himself and departed for it when he and Rainey emerged from the saloon. Winter's early evening

was coming in, the street lamps lighting up, and it promised to be a drenched and windy night. Rainey walked down toward Vines' Landing, but he could see from a distance that it was dark. But it didn't matter to him so much whether Nancy was home. He'd go up to the house and see Jess right after supper. The plan didn't hold out too much hope, but Rainey was glad Dan had agreed to it.

Rainey entered a small, sidestreet restaurant and had his supper, going over what he would say to Vines. It was full night when he emerged, and on the main street corner he pulled up in surprise. Nancy was moving along the far sidewalk, apparently heading for the sumptuous Umatilla House and supper. A huge and resplendent man escorted her. It was Morg Gatling.

He simply stepped right in and took over everything we had, Rainey thought hotly. But it was Nancy's quick change of sides that shocked him. If anybody had tried to tell him she would string out with the winning side, too, Rainey Scott would have gone on the warpath.

Just the same he headed doggedly into the residential section, hoping he could talk to Jess again, this time without Morg Gatling listening in. But the house, when he reached it, was completely dark. Nevertheless Rainey went up and pounded on the door a while. It brought no response.

He was heading up Front Street on the long walk to the fish landing when he saw Fancy Dan again. He saw him through the window of a dwelling that was also used for a restaurant. There was a girl at the table with him, a yellow-haired girl. She was laughing at Dan, and he was laughing back. Rainey pulled up his shoulders and trudged on through the rain, considerably enlightened as to the angle Fancy Dan had wanted to investigate.

Back aboard the *Upstart*, Rainey peeled off his clothes and slipped into his bunk. He couldn't sleep. In four or five hours everything worth having had been swept

away from him. His anger now had broadened to include Dan Peel, fritter-fratting with a yellow-head while he sent his partner off to save the company. But it was Dan's disloyalty to Nancy that irked Rainey. All the man had needed to know was that Nancy was going to be tied up somewhere, making it safe for him to see this laughing girl. But hadn't it served Nancy right, her going out to supper with the big and winning Morg Gatling?

Rainey awakened with the sense of something being radically wrong. River instinct told him instantly what it was. The *Upstart* was moving. Rainey was out of the bunk in a single leap and he didn't bother to reach for his clothes. Out on the side deck he saw a dismal gap between the packet and the landing. She was adrift—cut loose, probably—and there was no steam. Rainey began to yell like a Comanche to rouse the crew.

He could see nothing on the little skiff landing as he raced for the pilothouse. The wind was wet and gusty, but the *Upstart* had never been tied up so carelessly she could slip her lines. Rainey surged into the pilothouse and began to tromp the gong, just for the racket. He heard his men respond, yelling at one another. There wasn't a thing Rainey could do with that wheel. The *Upstart* was at the mercy of the current. The only chance was to drop the anchor, get it caught, then ferry her ashore to be tied up again. Otherwise she was going to pile up somewhere below town.

He saw men and yelled orders. The anchor went overboard, clatterty-clanging. Its chain ran out with a whistling rattle. The anchor hit bottom and began to drag while the packet swung steadily offshore. Then all at once the anchor line tightened. The packet brought up with a jerk. The wheel spokes nearly smoked as Rainey batted them. He threw the rudder over and felt the current begin to push her back toward shore.

Within jumping distance of shore, a man

went overside voluntarily with a line. He got a snub on a stump. That, with the anchor, held her fast. Now Rainey bawled to the engineer to build steam so they could put her back where she belonged.

The narrowness of the escape hit him belatedly. If he hadn't awakened, if they'd drifted into deeper and faster water . . . A miss was as good as a mile, but even so one could be hair-raising.

NOBODY crawled back into a bunk that night. With steam up again, they pulled back to the fish landing. The big lines had been cut beyond any doubt. Rainey knew who had done it but couldn't figure out why. Morg Gatling had won all the tricks, already. Why had he tried a stunt like this?

Rainey drank a few cups of black coffee without figuring it out. But one thing was certain. There was no getting insurance on this wild upper river. If the *Upstart* had lost her freight, Scott and Peel would have been ruined.

Rainey went ashore at daybreak, and he went straight to Fancy Dan's hotel. Dan had had a night of it and didn't take to being wakened so early. But he energized considerably when he heard what had almost happened.

"We'll fix Gatling for that," he promised. Then thoughtfully he added, "Did you talk it over with Jess?"

"Not yet."

"You better tend to it, boy. That Gatling's kicking dust in our eyes."

"I'm on my way to Jess's house. Figured you might want to come along."

"You go," Dan said. "I got another angle."

Rainey walked out. He was in something less than a soft mood when he reached the Vines house. Early as it was, he hammered the door with a bunched fist. It was Nancy who answered, looking alarmed.

"Where's Jess?" Rainey asked her.

"Not here," she said.

"Where?"

"I don't know. As near as I can tell he wasn't home last night. Rainey, you look frightful. Has something happened?"

"Nothing at all," he said. "Nothing whatsoever. How was supper?"

Nancy smiled. "You're mad about Gatling, I hope."

"You hope?"

"I knew you saw us. And I knew what you'd think. And you're partly right. We Vines like winners. Bye." Nancy closed the door on him.

As far as Rainey knew, Jess Vines wasn't given to staying away from home all night. He didn't drink or gamble but tended pretty much to business. But maybe he would show up at the landing before long. Rainey meant to be there when he did.

He was still a block away from the river when he heard sounds of disturbance at Vines' Landing. Swinging into a run, he rounded a corner and saw a knot of fighting men on the wharf, just forward of the big *Challenger*. Aghast, Rainey recognized the tall figure of Fancy Dan Peel in the middle of it, and he detected men from the *Upstart's* crew. This had been Dan's new angle, bringing the crew down to square accounts with Morg Gatling. Right now Gatling was racing down the gang plank to join the fray.

Useless as this was, Rainey was loyal to his crew. He doubled his speed. Coming onto the dock, he saw Jess Vines in the background, a scowl of annoyance on his face. Vines didn't like having his dock messed up. He was mainly a peaceable man.

The *Upstart's* crew was at bay, largely because the *Challenger* carried more men, and they were all pitching in. Rainey cut himself a piece of it and needed only a minute to realize he'd joined a bad business. The *Upstart* men were being overpowered and mauled, and then they were being pitched into the river. Rainey saw Fancy Dan go. Then Rainey was going himself.

The uneven battle was over that speedily.

The water was deep, cold and muddy, but it was quiet here. The *Upstart* crew splashed its way to the bank and crawled out, wet, licked and humiliated. The *Challenger* was taunting them loudly from the landing. As he sloshed up the bank, Rainey saw Jess Vines up there, and Jess's face was cold as the river water. Nonetheless, Rainey had business on his mind. Coming onto the road, he vaulted the loading platform and went into Jess's office. He stood there puddling water until Jess came in.

Jess looked surprised and angry, but at least Gatling wasn't with him. "What else do you want?" Jess asked gruffly.

"Sit down," Rainey told him, so forcibly that Jess did it.

"You're no blamed fool, Jess," Rainey said. "Gatling ain't the kind of man you'd pick to go partners with. You've got something up your sleeve, but that don't matter right now. I've got something up mine. Why don't you go partners with Scott and Peel, instead?"

"I don't like Scott and Peel," Jess said promptly. "I never did."

"What you got against us?"

"I just don't like Scott and Peel. That all you had to say, Rainey? If so, I'm busy."

"Jess!" Rainey bawled. "You let me come in with a load of freight without any warning that you were stopping my portage! You'll portage this one load or, by hell, I'll take the cost of it out of your hide!"

Boots hit the planking beyond the river-side door. Morg Gatling framed himself there. "What're you doing in here, bucko?" he demanded.

"You get the hell outta here," Rainey said.

"You better go, Morg," Jess advised. "This is old business, between me and Rainey."

Gatling pulled around and walked off,

but he had looked a little puzzled. Jess Vines swiveled his chair, lifted his boot-heels to the window ledge and for a long while studied the river. Presently he said, "Tell you what, Rainey. Mebbe I should have given more warning. You have it unloaded in the next couple of hours and I'll portage the one load for you."

"Unloaded where?" Rainey asked. "Gatling's hogging your whole landing."

"Told you what I'd do, Rainey," Jess said, and he seemed to go to sleep right there.

Rainey left the little office on the double. As near as he could tell, his men had headed back up to the fish landing to get into dry clothes. He had run the chill out of his own body by the time he reached the *Upstart*. The engineer hadn't joined the sally against the *Challenger*, and the wisping 'scape pipes showed that he still had steam.

Rainey went up the texas ladder like a monkey and yelled into the speaking tube connection with the engineroom. "George! We're putting down to Vines' to discharge freight!"

THE *Challenger* was due to stand down the river at any time, but Rainey knew she wouldn't turn a wheel once Gatling suspected the *Upstart* wanted the landing. Rainey threw the little steamboat out into the channel. He pointed her downstream, for all the world as if he didn't mean to slack off short of Portland. But as he stood off Vines' Landing, he put her ashore, swinging wide to come in from downstream. The *Challenger* had steam up, he saw, but she still lay tight on her lines.

Presently Rainey was steering a collision course straight at the *Challenger's* big stern paddles. He saw deckhands standing with their mouths open, and up on her texas Morg Gatling was shaking a warning fist. At the last moment Rainey veered over, fast and hard, sending a heavy wash against the *Challenger* that made her bobble.

He yelled at Gatling as he churned past, "The next time I'm putting in behind you, man! There'd better be room or you're out a paddle wheel!"

Gatling only shook his fist again. Once more Rainey swung the stalwart little packet out into midchannel, the *Upstart* fairly kicking up her paddles. Again he heeled over and swung back toward the shore. He bore in directly from behind the big *Challenger* with all kinds of way. He slacked off and slid in and didn't turn an inch away from the bigger boat's paddles. In the last split second the *Challenger's* wheel churned heavily and she slid forward even as the *Upstart* reversed to a stop, square at the landing.

"Drop the gang plank!" Rainey sang out.

Dock hustlers were ready with their trundle trucks and they looked pleased. Aboard the *Challenger* things seemed strangely peaceful. Morg Gatling had lost his nerve. He wasn't coming out right then in search of trouble. But he sat tight, disdaining to stand down the river now. Yet the *Upstart* had emptied her freighthouse within the two-hour limit Vines had set.

Rainey walked back into Jess Vines' office. If Jess had noticed what had been going on, he gave no sign, holding himself aloof and stony-faced.

"Now, Jess," Rainey announced, "I'll take aboard a payload and stand down the river."

"You'll what?"

"I'll have a load of freight or take its value out of your hide. Thereafter I'll figure I been fairly warned and will make new plans."

Jess studied his fingernails a while, then grumbled, "I reckon you've got me there, too, Rainey. I'll tell the boys to load the stuff regularly consigned by you. This one time. Then, as you say, you been properly warned, with no kick coming."

"I'll have been warned," Rainey admitted, "but believe me, Jess, I'll still have a kick coming."

Jess walked out through a doorway into the big old warehouse. Rainey went back aboard the *Upstart*, satisfied with proceedings to this point and again thinking of the little steamboat's narrow escape during the night. He had suffered no actual damages, but tricks like that were skunk-mean, beneath the dignity and the decency of a real river man. But Rainey wasn't going to tell Jess about that in order to point out the kind of hombre the old man figured to team up with. Let Jess find that out for himself. A gaffer his age should have developed the ability to size up his own men.

Freight had barely started moving aboard the *Upstart* when Morg Gatling stumped down the bigger boat's gang plank onto the wharf. Rainey saw him push into Jess's office, and a minute later Rainey heard yelling voices in there. Gatling seemed to be arguing over the propriety of the *Upstart's* receiving freight. But he also seemed to get nowhere, for he emerged presently looking angrier than ever.

Rainey started down the gang plank, and he met Gatling at the bottom. Gatling halted and planted his hands on his hips and glared.

"About last night," Rainey said. "I can't prove it, and there's no use trying. But I can tell you that if anything like that happens again I'll blow a hole in you a man could throw a cat through. Understand, Gatling?"

"I got no idea what you're talking about," Gatling said, then contradicted himself by hurrying on.

Fancy Dan showed up then. He had gone back to the hotel to change his clothes, then apparently had taken a few drinks to take the chill out of his bones. "I'll be blamed," he said. "I started up to the fish landing and saw you'd gone. How'd you get down here, and how'd you get Jess to let loose of any freight for us?"

Rainey Scott took a good look at his partner. It was the first time he had ever noticed that Dan's lips were a little petu-

lant, that the life he lived was making marks around his handsome eyes. The light that danced in those eyes was recklessness, and a commendable recklessness, but it was also foolhardiness. But the thing Rainey was remembering most was that yellow-head. Fancy Dan had had himself a time and how he could do that in the same town that held Nancy, Rainey didn't know.

To Dan's question, Rainey said, "Sort of worked itself out. Nothing to it, Dan. But you better get back to the Deschutes. You're going to have freight for Wallula."

Dan nodded. "Aim to. Just come down to say so long."

"So long," Rainey said.

HE WATCHED Dan Peel leave. He had a notion they would be splitting up now that luck had clattered for them here on the middle river. Come high water, he could run the *Upstart* over the rapids at The Cascades and put her to work somewhere on the lower river where there were all kinds of towns with lots of river business. Dan had already been talking about going up on the Snake, a wild river that would appeal to a man like Dan. Not that there was anything wrong with Dan. They were still friends and would always be. But not partners. Gatling had certainly succeeded in breaking things up. . . .

Rainey straightened and flung a surprised look forward. The *Challenger* had taken in her lines and was moving out. She slid forward, cut out into the river, then headed downstream. There was something crestfallen about her.

Then he looked the other way when a voice bawled, "Rainey, come here a minute!" It was Jess, calling from the doorway of his office.

Rainey descended to the landing, turned aft slackly and stepped into the old man's office once more.

Jess had settled back into his chair and got his feet comfortable on the window sill

again. He said, "Get this through your head, Rainey. You ain't offering me any partnership. To hell with Scott and Peel. I never liked it any."

"You already said that," Rainey answered.

Jess swung around and looked full at Rainey, as if he hadn't heard. "It's me who's offering you a partnership. Not Scott and Peel. Just Scott. I won't have nothing to do with that four-flushin' partner of yours."

"Now, look!" Rainey said, bristling. "Dan's a friend of mine!"

"That part's all right," Jess said. "You don't have to break up. But let him know who's boss. I seen him ride on your shoulders all this while, you keeping the outfit going and growing, him showing off. I seen you stand back and let him shine up to my girl, her scarcely able to stand him. Out with it, now. He's been a free-rider, ain't he?"

"Jess," Rainey said weakly, "I guess you're right."

Jess grinned then. "Lots of runts got your trouble, boy. I had it once. They automatically take a back seat for a bigger, flashier man. You did it for Fancy Dan. But if you'd ever got hurt or took sick, he'd have found out quick he couldn't begin to fill your boots."

"Jess, you got me beat!" Rainey gasped.

The old man leaned forward. "Don't get me wrong. I was considering Gatling's proposition. He told me he'd have the other independents run off the river in three months. And if I didn't want him starting up a competing portage, I'd better throw

in with him. Well, if he'd run you other independents out, I wouldn't have had any business anyhow, would I? And me with fifty thousand dollars worth of equipment on my hands. So I strung along with Gatling, a little to see how easy you'd quit."

"You figured I wouldn't?" Rainey asked.

"Only hoped. But Nancy claimed she knew you wouldn't."

"Thought she'd taken a shine to Gatling, going to supper with him and all."

"We wanted that man confident," Jess said. "We wanted him to get careless. He did. Cost me a night's sleep, keeping tabs on him and his crew. Seen him cut your lines. I was about to shoot out your window to wake you up when you caught onto it. Then and there I knew I didn't want him for a partner. Now, I'm talking too damn much. Why don't you go up and let Nancy give you some breakfast?"

Rainey had already eaten on the *Upstart* but he needed no second invitation. He went out through the other door, onto the street, and headed for the Vines house. Nancy was home and she had breakfast waiting, as if she had expected him.

"I did," she said, when he asked her. "I told Dad that once you woke up you'd be a gee-whizzer. And I figured you'd wake up fast when Gatling threatened to ruin you. I bet you'd have Gatling beat by breakfast time, and he said he'd send you up to eat if you did."

"Nancy!" he whispered, and she whispered, "Rainey."

It was wonderful the way she had to tilt back her head when they got past the talking point.

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*Side by side they fought howling blizzard and
icy flood to save those Muleshoe beeves—and
earn the right to meet each other face to face
... with blazing Colts in their fists!*



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CHAPTER 1

Treachery Trail

JACK BOYDEN was not prepared for a blizzard. It had been a warm late winter day when he left the little cross-roads town of Beehive City in search of the Muleshoe Ranch, where he was assured

he could get a job. Now only a couple of hours on the way the precipitous dropping of temperature already bit through his thin jacket and worn levis. Then the wind hit him like something solid. It came across

COFFINS FREE



The cattle plowed through the water, churning it into choppy waves of white foam.

By **ART LAWSON**

Dramatic Novelette of the Northwest Range

the prairie with nothing to stop it for six hundred miles and it struck him with the impact of a thousand fists.

In minutes the horizon was black; the prairie was gradually being swallowed up in the advancing storm. Almost from the first the tiny ice particles of a blue norther

knifed at his face like bits of glass from a battery of cannon. His horse did not like it and took to shying off the trail, fighting Jack, trying to make him turn tail to the storm like the cattle drifting slowly by. The horse began to buck like crazy; and from then on it was a constant battle be-

between them, man and beast and blizzard.

Jack reckoned his chances of surviving this blue norther in a strange country were about one in a thousand. Yet there was neither bitterness in him nor anger against a fate that seemed always to steer him up the wrong trails or throw him into unendurable situations. His string of mean luck had gone on so long it had toughened him. It had inured him. Jack simply accepted what came his way and did the best he could with it.

Finally he had to get down from the saddle to drag the horse's head around into the gale again and go on afoot. He had drawn his bandana around against his mouth and nose to protect his lungs against the driving ice. He pulled his Stetson down low over his forehead. Slouching ahead he drove himself into the storm, steering by the whistle of wind, struggling into the almost impenetrable wall ahead with closed eyes.

This was his only chance, to go into the storm. The barkeeper in Beehive City's American House had told him to head straight north until he struck a plow furrow across the prairie and then to turn west. It would be eighteen to twenty miles to the furrow that was a county boundary line marked out by a surveyor last fall and anywhere from one to five miles west depending on how direct Jack's northern bearing turned out to be.

You could not miss the Muleshoe Ranch, this hombre had promised. Like a city in itself: corrals, windmills, bunkhouses, blacksmith shop. They even had a commissary that was opened on Saturdays in the vain hope that it would keep the boys home over the weekend.

Thinking of this brought a grin to Jack's stiff lips. He wished that barkeeper had come along with him now to tell him he could not miss the Muleshoe.

Then he stumbled. He fell to his knees in the gritty snow. The horse stopped immediately, head low. It seemed to take

forever for Jack to struggle to his feet. He took a step and stumbled again. This time he felt as if he had been knocked down with a club. The cold had gotten to him so, the skin of his legs seemed to be dry and brittle; it seemed to be cracking up like a snake's skin when it was shedding. Jack was not at all sure that he could get up again. He was not certain that he wished to.

Slowly he realized what had happened. He had fallen into that furrow.

This helped him get up. With the wind at his right side now, he had a tendency to drift south. Constantly he had to keep coming back to that furrow. It was like tacking in a small boat against a northeaster.

"You can't miss it," the barkeeper had said. "Like a little town."

Jack was beginning to feel silly and irresponsible as the cold got to him. He knew he was freezing to death. Ice no longer cut him so he noticed it. His cold, cracked skin felt warm. His mind had a tendency to wander off and laugh at him. It went away and came back, and one of the times it returned it told Jack he had finally come to some sort of shelter. He straightened up. Inches from his face a square window glowed with light. He could see through it where somebody had rubbed away the frost. He saw a stove in there red as a cherry. He saw a couple of cowboys sitting on bunks. They were both old-timers. One was twanging a guitar. The other was plaiting a horsehair bridle.

Jack was sure he had gone crazy.

He lifted a hand to tap on the window. His knees sagged. He clutched for support. The window vanished. . . .

THE place was warm. It smelled of fire and coffee and bacon and men. It was a strong, full smell. It smelled of horsesweat and rawhide and neatsfoot oil. It smelled of tobacco and Mexican corn-shuck cigarettes.

Jack fought eyes that refused to open. "He's coming to," someone said.

Jack's eyes opened now and he was looking straight into the pale blue eyes of an old man who badly needed a shave. It hurt Jack when he grinned at the man.

"Muleshoe?" Jack asked.

The oldster nodded. "Picked you up last night," he said, "tappin' on the window like a crow. Fetched in your hoss, too. Was just down to the stable. Your ole crow-bait's doin' fine."

Jack said, "Thanks, friend."

He felt tired to the guts. But he had arrived. His horse was okay. The old cowboy was the one he had seen last night plaiting the horsehair bridle. He had reached the Muleshoe where the barkeeper had assured him he could easily get a job.

Jack sat up in the bunk. Somebody had taken off his boots and his jacket and had loosened the top button on his levis. They had hung his holstered pistol over the foot of the bunk. Jack saw that the gun had been cleaned and oiled.

"Damn it," Jack said, too full to again thank the old-timer. His face stung as if he had pushed over a red ants' nest with it. His bones ached and his legs felt as if they had been scalded. But Jack felt fine. He put out a hand to this oldster. "Name of Boyden," he said. "Jack Boyden."

"Hank O'Keefe." The oldster shook with him.

"Glad to know you."

"Likewise."

They did not have much to say after that. Jack sat on the bunk looking about him. Hank had brought in his saddle and rubbed it down with oil. He had taken some polish to the silver inlay.

"Like bein' fitted up for a funeral," Jack laughed. "You sure worked hard, shinin' up all my stuff."

"Ain't nothin'," Hank said. He poked at the stove.

Outside the wind still screamed. There

was a blue light in the window through which Jack had looked last night. For the first time he realized that it was daylight. He must have slept ten-twelve hours at least. "It had seemed like nothing. But Hank could not have shined up everything in only a couple of minutes.

"What time is it?" Jack asked.

"Gettin' on to noon," Hank said.

Jack swung his legs from under the blanket. Barefooted he tried a step. He marveled that he could walk. He breathed deeply to stretch the beaten muscles of his chest. He flexed his arms. He was grinning with pleasure when someone knocked on the door and opened it to Hank's "Come in." Vacuum from the lee of the building sucked smoke from the stove in one dark puff. Then the door clicked shut and Jack twisted his head about to see who had come in.

The cowboy's eyes dilated. He was immediately embarrassed at being barefooted, at having the tails of his shirt out, at needing a shave. Their visitor was a girl. Her cheeks were red from the cold. Her lips were crimson and her nose pink. But her eyes were black when she laughed.

"What's the matter with him, Hank? He freeze in that position last night?"

"Reckon," the oldster said.

Jack dropped his arms. Color burned his face.

"Mornin', miss," he said.

"I'm Nell Bishop." She went directly to the point. "I own the Muleshoe. What're you doing in this country?"

Jack had never before met anyone like her. The barkeeper in Beehive City had not prepared him for this.

"Feller in the American House said you'd have a job for me," he said.

THE girl looked him over much as she might have examined a steer she was thinking of buying. She saw that he was six feet of whalebone and rawhide. His eyes were blue, the corners crinkled from

looking off over endless plains. His hands were rope burned and the seat of his pants had been shined by his saddle.

"Can you peel the rough string?" she asked.

"I can ride anything," he said.

The girl laughed. It was sudden as the waves in a mountain pool when a trout has jumped. "You can ride anything!" she said. "Where did I hear that before? We'll see, cowboy." She put out a hand and he shook with her. Though the hand was small, her grip was strong, straightforward. "Forty a month, beans and bullets—begin as soon as you feel like it. Your pay starts when you do."

She dropped his hand and wheeled away.

"Show him around, Hank," she said to the old-timer.

Jack tried to remember what the girl looked like and for the life of him he could not reconstruct her at all in his mind. He could not even remember how she had been dressed when she came into the bunkhouse. All he could picture was the partly hidden fire behind black eyes—a generous mouth—a firm handshake.

Forty a month, beans and bullets.

"What're the bullets for?" Jack asked Hank O'Keefe.

The old-timer was showing him around. The gale had abated somewhat. They kicked through drifts between the ranch's buildings. "Just in case," Hank said.

They came to a long, low shelter. This was a lean-to roof with a wall against the low northern side. The south side was open. The shelter was crowded with cows and small calves. A steer was trying to nose its way in and Hank drove it off.

"Scat, you lump o' meat!" he scolded. "Ain't got no manners!"

"Ain't got no more manners than my arm," Jack agreed.

He slapped the steer's rump and watched him go skidding into the snow. Then they went on. They passed a horse corral that Hank said held the quiet ones. They came

to another. One side of it was a shed like the one in which the cows were crowded. The horses were solid in it.

"These are your playmates," Hank said.

The horses ignored the cowboys. Jack went after one, a big black hammerhead, and the beast turned on him, trying to bite him, ugly and mean and ornery.

"He's about the most peaceable of the lot," Hank said. "Wait'll you, toss a leg over some of 'em."

"Beginnin' tomorrow," Jack said.

This was good. Jack felt that this was very fine indeed. He was still stiff and weak, but by tomorrow he would be more than ready to give these rough horses a working. One thing Jack had no doubt about was his ability to handle anything on four hoofs.

He turned to the bunkhouse, following Hank. Wind had died out now except for an occasionally flurry that raised a little cloud of snow to whirl around in a dance. He could see the whole Muleshoe: the low, snug main house—the half dozen bunkhouses, most of them small, an unusual arrangement in this country—the cookshack where the men went to eat.

Yeah, Jack thought, this was the place where he would beat his bad luck. This was the spread for him.

He went through the keen air savoring the feeling of peace within himself. As they approached their bunkhouse the cook appeared at his door banging on the triangle. Jack and Hank changed their course to go to the cook-shack. Inside they shucked heavy coats and stamped feet free of snow. Most of the men were out today hunting strays, searching for calving cows and steers that had become bogged down in the drifts. Only a couple of men were at the long table.

The two cowboys went up to them. Hank started to introduce Jack.

"Slim, this is the new peeler."

The man named Slim got up. He held a hand for Jack Boyden. Slim's lips twitched

and he withdrew his hand before Jack had raised his. Slim had become as pale as the drifts outside.

Jack stared at him. Long ago he had sworn to kill Slim Lederle on sight—and here he was.

"Evenin', Slim," Jack said. "Or did you change your name when you got down here?"

"I didn't change my name," Slim said. He edged Jack down the cook-shack away from the other men. Lips tight across shining teeth, he asked: "You came looking for me?"

"Not exactly," Jack shook his head. "But now that we're both here, Slim, what are you going to do about—"

"This!" Slim Lederle said.

He lifted a fist from the floor. It was a treacherous move and it caught Jack absolutely flat-footed.

CHAPTER 2

"Quit—Or Fight!"

JACK tried to dance away. He collided with Hank O'Keefe, who was standing there dumfounded by this sudden violence. The ramrod's fist skinned along the point of Jack's jaw and stopped short of his ear. It staggered him and drove him back against the table on which the cook was just setting a great bowl of stew. The cook swore loudly.

Jack regained his balance. Slim Lederle was boring in, smashing at him, short hard punches to the face and stomach. With his back to the heavy table, Jack could not put up effective resistance. He grappled blindly for Slim, kneeling him until he drew back. Free of the table, Jack released the foreman. For a moment the two men stood on spread feet, staring, breathing shallowly.

The cook was shouting at them above the ruckus:

"Pelados! Keep away from the stew!"

They did not hear him. They had ears

and eyes only for themselves. They were each intent on searching for a fatal opening in the other's defense.

Jack had taken a terrible beating in the first unexpected onslaught. Added to the weariness following his struggle with the storm, he felt completely incapable of putting up an attack or even making a fair defense. He felt half asleep on his feet, paralyzed, alone and at Slim's mercy.

Then Slim bored in. Jack parried the blow. He got in a couple of good ones himself, to the pit of Slim's stomach, doubling up the man, bringing a grunt from deep within him. He followed with a swing to the jaw that missed, and he put so much power behind it the weight of his arm drew him sidewise to Slim. Slim was quick to take advantage of it. He chopped down straight for Jack's ear; he slammed in another fist to Jack's nose. He spun the cowboy around, then tripped him, hammered him down to the floor and kicked him in the ribs.

Jack hardly felt it. He got to his hands and knees and was kicked flat again. Jack lay on the dusty floor with his face to a crack between the rough boards. He could not move at all now. He could only lie there and take it. He could not even feel the final kick of a sharp heel that cracked a rib.

It was like observing something from another world.

"Take him out. If he can't sit his horse, tie him on it. Get rid of him. If he stays here—he'll get a free coffin."

Slim Lederle's voice, that was.

There was a great laughter and roaring in his ears. He learned that he was being moved when cold air slapped his hot face. Hank O'Keefe was on one side, an arm around his waist. Another cowboy supported his other side.

Jack heard Hank say: "Somebody'll kill Slim some day."

The other cowboy said: "This hombre's coming to, Hank."

Jack had no feelings at all except for

the cool breeze against his skin. He was numb in every muscle. Yet he found a grin somewhere.

"Finer'n frawg's hair," he said.

Precariously Jack balanced himself on the edge of his bunk trying to keep down the nausea that tugged at him. Bitterly he thought of Slim Lederle and the feud that had dogged him through so many weary lost miles of wandering.

He and Slim had been pardners in a tight little horse ranch up Wyoming way. They had been doing so well with it, they went to town one night to celebrate. Unfortunately they ran into a fight with a tinhorn and almost killed him. The battle ended with Jack in jail, the gambling man in a hospital where the doc expected he would die, and Slim hiding out in the badlands.

But the tinhorn had lived. On condition that Jack pay specific damages they had let him out of jail—just in time to discover that all his stock had vanished and his pardner had disappeared. The rest of the spread was swallowed up by the gambler's claims.

That was when Jack swore he would kill Slim for deserting him and running away with the horses. He had passed the news up and down the trail. He had followed Slim from hell to breakfast until he had finally completely lost him. Now chance had brought them together for the first time—and the chore had yet to be done.

Old Hank O'Keefe broke into Jack's reverie.

"Feelin' better?"

"Nah!" Jack said. "Worse."

THE bunkhouse door swung open. Slim Lederle came in. He left the door open and stood on the threshold. He kept his hands close to holstered guns. "One of the boys just come in," he said in clipped tones. "He's been ridin' line down along Comanche Wash. Says the cows have been driftin' in there until they're stacked up like cordwood. Four-five hundred of them.

See if you can get up a crew for me, Hank. We're goin' down there to drag them cows out."

The old-timer shrugged into his coat and left with decided misgivings. Jack watched Slim standing there. He kept his line of vision on Slim's belt buckle.

"You're driftin'," Slim said slowly. "And quit followin' me. There's no two ways about it, Jack. I got a good thing here and I'm keepin' it. You bothered me enough. Next time I see you I'll kill you."

"What's the matter with now?" Jack asked softly.

"When I kill you," Slim said, "I'll have plenty of witnesses to say it was self-defense. I've grown up, Jackie boy—even if you haven't."

He wheeled away, slamming the door. Through the fogged window Jack saw him go down to the lean-to barns. Hank had located half a dozen men to go with Slim. They saddled up. They wrapped themselves in sheepskin coats and stuffed their boots into lined overshoes. They took along a couple spare horses apiece and headed south.

Soon the cook followed with a chuckbox lashed to the rear of his buckboard, indicating that Slim expected to be gone two or three days. The cook had hitched four big mules to the traces, figuring that they could haul him through any damn drift they might encounter. Then he whipped out of the yard, his mules kicking snow clods against the dashboard, his wheels spinning brightly in the white stuff.

Jack rolled over on the bunk. The pain in his ribs was a hot, live thing. He had been badly beaten. He told himself that he had not been given a fair chance, that the storm had licked him before Slim had treacherously attacked him. He bit his lip, trying to forget, trying to ease himself. Miraculously he fell asleep.

He woke at the sound of someone stamping on the bunkhouse floor. In a moment of strange panic Jack opened his eyes to

recognize the girl. She was kicking snow from her small feet.

"I hear you're leaving," she said. "If you're broke we'll give you a little dinero to carry you a while. Come up to the house when you're ready to go."

"Uh—" Jack gulped a breath. He got off the bunk to stand before her. It hurt his cracked rib. The directness of the girl twisted up his thoughts in regard to Slim Lederle, then suddenly straightened them all out again. "Uh—you made a mistake, miss," he said. "I'm not goin' anywhere. Fact is I thought I'd start work today. Why wait until tomorrow? Thought I'd—uh—go down to this Comanche Wash and help the boys unstack your herd."

"You think it wise?" the girl looked straight into his eyes. "I heard about Slim beating up on you. Men he beats up usually drift—if they aren't buried."

And coffins free . . .

Jack now found he could laugh. It showed no humor. "He got me when I wasn't looking. Next time it'll be a different story. I'm not driftin', ma'am. I'm not beat up for keeps. I'm sticking it out right here."

The corner of the girl's curved mouth had a little quirk to it. Her jet eyes softened ever so slightly. "You knew him before you came here," she said.

"Sorta," Jack admitted.

"Afraid of him?"

"No, ma'am," Jack said. "He's afraid of me, ma'am."

"You'll do," the girl said suddenly. "You have a cut over your eye. You're standing like a man would if he had a broken rib. Come over to the house and I'll fix you up with a couple pieces of sticking plaster."

She left then, and shortly afterwards old Hank O'Keefe came in. Jack had been waiting for him. Hank shed his heavy coat. He filled a pipe with tobacco and went over to the wood box and hunted up a long splinter he could use as a match.

Jack wanted to ask him what the girl had on her mind. Now that Hank was here, it seemed like a foolish question.

"Jest us women, old men an' cripples around," Hank said. "Goin' to be lonesome again when you're gone."

"I ain't leaving," Jack said. "I—uh—got to go up to the house. Then I'm riding for Comanche Wash. This going to the house is orders."

Hank had found his splinter and was trying to light it from the stove. He was not being very successful. "Strictly orders," he said.

HEAVY Mexican rugs were on the floor of the living room. Coal glowed in the fireplace. Deep chairs and a huge divan brought an ache to Jack's throat. This was the way to live—not in the bare bunk of a bunkhouse. A man could assemble his life around him in a place like this, just as some relative of Nell Bishop's had brought together the Comanche war bonnets and shields, the lances, the old guns and mounted buffalo and elk heads that adorned the walls. A man could really live here—if he had a woman.

Then she came in. He still could not remember what she looked like. The eyes and mouth were all he remembered. Now he saw her dark hair for the first time, blue-black with a curl in it. He saw she was smaller than he had thought. In sweater and skirt and boots she was slimly curved. The body that had had no shape in its heavy coat was lovely and delicate as some fine bit of Mexican silver work. The girl was so beautiful it hurt.

"Come over here," she ordered.

He went around the divan. On a small chair she had laid out some things, bandage, bottles, little pieces of wood and a box of cotton. She touched a match to the wick of a patented lamp that hung from the ceiling. When the flame took it shed a cone of light on Jack.

"Take off your shirt," she said, "and

take off your undershirt. I studied nursing for a spell down at Austin. Don't ask me why."

Jack reacted slowly. He was not used to taking off his shirt and undershirt before a woman. He made his protest.

"I'm okay, ma'am. There's nothin' wrong with me that you can't fix with my shirt on."

"The last man got into a fight with Slim had four broken ribs. You have one, at least. I know all about these things. Off with the shirt, cowboy."

There was no more argument. The girl was used to giving orders, Jack could see that. He was glad he had gotten a haircut and taken a bath with his last dollar in Beehive City. He was glad he had on a clean undershirt. But when he got to it, the singlet held back. He yanked. It came over his head with a little tearing feeling.

"Blood," the girl said.

She looked at his ribs. There was a dark, bruised spot on his left side below the heart. The blow had been so sharp it had cut the skin. It had started bleeding again, and there was a splotch of dark red on Jack's shirt.

"He did that with his heel," she said.

The bitterness in her voice was a shock to Jack. She had been so cool, so much in control of herself that this evidence of emotion really astonished him. She seemed to expect an answer. She was looking up at him; her dark eyes suddenly gone soft and warm.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"You haven't been eating very regular," she said.

"No, ma'am," he answered.

She kept her eyes on him, steady. The tips of her fingers were lightly touching his bare chest near the spot where he had been kicked.

"I'm going to probe around, see if this rib is broken or just cracked. If you feel like fainting"—she smiled—"faint backwards. The divan's big and soft."

"I won't faint," Jack promised.

"Of course you won't," she said.

She probed at him gently. Involuntarily he sucked in a sudden breath. He bit his lips. A great dizziness hit him and he felt very weak. He laughed very loud. She had stopped touching him.

"You thought I'd faint," he said. "Say—uh—" He was sitting down. He had no memory of having done so, and the girl, standing between him and the glowing fireplace was laughing with him. "Say—" he gulped.

"That's likely to happen to anyone," she said. "You've been on short rations for a long time by the skinny look of you. You were nearly frozen to death in a blizzard. You were beaten up. What do you expect?" She poured a tumbler half full of whiskey and watered it slightly. "Here, take this."

He drank it thankfully. It warmed him. It danced inside him and made his hurts seem like nothing. "What did you find out?" he asked.

"Cracked. I can tape it up, cowboy. In a week you won't know you ever were hurt."

He did not faint again. He watched her work. He felt the deftness of her hands on him. Intently she went about her job, and her long dark hair fell forward to tickle his bare chest, and the scent of it was warm and sweet in his nostrils.

"You hate Slim," she said without looking up.

"That's right," he muttered.

"You'll have to fight him again if you stay around, and maybe a third time," she said softly. "If you want to leave I won't think badly of you."

"I'm staying," Jack said.

The girl finished with the bandage. She put some disinfectant on a patch and plastered it on the cut over his eye. He was slipping the shirt over his head when she said:

"I'm going to marry Slim Lederle. I'm engaged to him."

Jack tucked his shirt-tails into his pants.

"I'm powerful sorry to hear that," he said.

CHAPTER 3

Back Trail of Hate

HANK got a sheep-lined coat from the commissary for Jack Boyden, and found him a pair of good warm mittens and some overshoes. It was too late in the day now to go to Comanche Wash, so Jack waited until morning. That night a couple men came in for more supplies, and a third rode up to tell of bad news along Longhorn Creek.

Like the Wash, the big bend of Longhorn had acted as a trench to pick up drifting cattle. Some had fallen through the ice and were drowned. Others had crossed over the bridge built of frozen bodies. There was hell to pay and worse all along the southern part of the Muleshoe range.

Jack left before dawn with a couple of pack horses loaded with food. There had been a slight thaw the day before and the night's freeze had put a glare of ice over the prairie. His horses slipped and snorted until they became used to the treacherous footing. By then the dawn was velvet, the sun was graying the sky, and Jack knew that the thaw today would be almost complete.

He remembered that saying about the weather in Boston. If you don't like it, wait a minute and it will change. Boston had nothing on this country. If you didn't like the weather here you didn't have to wait that minute. Sometimes you got two or three kinds of weather at once.

Now the sun shot its rays up in a great yellow fan to the east, gilding the rolling, snow-covered prairie. The horses got spirit from the daylight and increased their pace. The night's sleep had done Jack a lot of good. If it were not for the rib knifing pain at every jog, he would have felt wonderful today. Jack had not run away this

time; he had not quit; he had bucked old lady Bad Luck and old man Fate; and if he had not won, at least he had not lost.

He thought of the girl and he did not like the thoughts. He had not known there could be anyone like her, strong and lovely, soft and clean. It was a horrible thing that she should marry Slim Lederle.

Well, he mused, that was no affair of his. His business with Slim did not include Miss Nell Bishop.

He breathed of the clear, crisp air, looking skyward, changed his direction slightly to head toward the dot-like circlings of buzzards in the sky. Already he could feel the warmth of the sun on his side.

Gradually he swept under the wheeling black birds. He saw smoke ahead, spotted movement on the prairie; and soon he was in the temporary camp of the Muleshoe boys at Comanche Wash. He reined in beside the buckboard that carried the open chuck-box. The cook glanced up from his dutch ovens, weary to exhaustion. When he recognized Jack, an odd apprehensive look came into his smoke-reddened eyes. Jack grinned at him.

"Got eatin' food aboard these horses," Jack said. "Where'll I unload them, friend?"

"Anywhere," the cook said. "But if you've got a spare cook in one of them bags, drop him right over here."

"Sure wish I had," Jack said.

He dropped reins over his horse's head and got down. He tied the pack animals to the buckboard before slipping the squaw hitches holding on the baggage. He laid a tarpaulin on the snow and dumped the stuff on top of it.

"Got a couple bottles of old Monongahela," Jack said. "Miss Nell sent it. Said to give the boys a short snort or two come evening."

"Nell's a hundred percent," the cook said. That apprehension crossed his eyes again. "Ninety-nine per cent, anyway. I don't mind tellin' you, cowboy, I don't savvy

that other one percent of her I don't like. You put up a real fight." He managed a wisp of a smile. "Next time you better do your scrappin' someplace else—not around a bowl of my stew. I thought a couple of times you was goin' to land right in it, and the recipe didn't call for no treatment like that."

The cook had not said straight out what it was he did not like about Nell. Jack could guess it must be her promise to marry Slim. He was on the point of asking the cook if that was what he had been hinting about, then stopped himself.

"Know where Slim is?" Jack asked.

"You ain't going to start up—" The cook stared at him. He changed his tactics. "He's down in the wash, cowboy. It was good knowin' you."

HE RODE down the wash. The place was a shambles. Snow was still thirty feet deep in here. It had drifted for miles across the prairie to pile up on the trapped cattle. A lot of these beeves had died during the blizzard, and others had given up since. There was no counting how many had perished in the norther that had almost taken Jack Boyden's life as well.

Sweating cowboys were still digging them out. They had a couple of teams down there hitched to whiffletrees. When they found a steer in the drift, they would run a logging chain around his horns and drag him out. If he still lived a cowboy would goad and kick him up the side of the wash to a place where bales of hay had been broken and spread on the prairie. A lot of these cattle, weak, sick and half suffocated, would recover.

Slim Lederle was on foot taking his turn with a shovel when Jack found him. Slim was as red-eyed as the others. It gave him a curiously baleful appearance when he scowled up at Jack, who remained in the saddle.

"I thought I told you to travel," Slim said.

"I'm not working for you," Jack said. "I'm working for Miss Bishop. I'm taking my orders from her."

Slim stuck his shovel into the snow. He pushed back his Stetson from a brow damp with sweat. "Notice she patched up your face for you," Slim said after a moment. His eyes blackened. "Some fellers never learn, do they, Jack? So you're working for her, are you? You're letting her take you into her parlor to try out her nursing, huh? You're taking orders from Nell?" Slim shrugged. His mouth quirked up at the corner. "What are these orders?"

"She sent me down with grub," Jack said evenly. "I delivered it to the cook. One of the boys came up from the big bend of Longhorn Creek, wherever that is. He says there's another jam down there. Miss Nell said you'd be interested in knowing about it."

"They ask for help?"

"No."

"Then supposin' you go right back and tell Nell thanks," Slim said. "And if I was you—I'd tell her good-by at the same time."

"Don't reckon I'll do the farewell just yet," Jack said shortly.

"Then I guess I'll have to beat you up again," Slim said. "This time I'll finish the job." He was holding his shovel as if he would bash Jack with it. For one of those moments that knows no time they faced each other. Slim's face was hard and cold as the ice underfoot.

Jack's lips were motionless when he spoke. "I'm waitin'."

Slim stared at him, then lowered his shovel and returned to the drift. Slim was not backing out of the fight. Slim was only putting first things first. Personal feuds have to follow important duty to the outfit.

Jack knew this was the situation as he turned his horse up to the cavy and set him loose in charge of the kid wrangler. That rib was still goading him. The sensible thing for him to do would be to re-

turn to the Muleshoe and go to bed. But he could not do that while there were still live steers and cows buried in the wash. Besides he wanted to be around when this job was finished and he and Slim would be free agents.

He relieved a cowboy on one of the teams. This was work he could do. It had the added advantage of being at the opposite end of the drift from Slim where Jack could work in peace. The sun clambered overhead, its glare a terrific thing that rawed the eyes. As it started tumbling down to the west, a trickle could be heard in the wash. A warm night would turn this dry gully into a torrent. Cold weather would freeze it solid. If anything was to be accomplished it had to be done before sunset.

There was no rest. Jack dragged another big steer up to the lip of the wash. He counted a couple hundred there, stretched out lifeless. Tomorrow they would be skinned, their hides saved. The carcasses would make a feast for the buzzards and coyotes who had come from miles around to wait until they could leap into this great bonanza of a meal. Next summer during slack season wagons would collect the bones for fertilizer. Meanwhile only hours were allotted for saving the living.

THERE were four or five hundred of these gaunted animals already saved and more coming up. There were some that had to be shot. But the sweat and guts of the cowboys were slowly rescuing the Muleshoe from what promised to be disaster. It was still a terrific blow, a tragedy. But the Muleshoe would survive.

Involuntarily Jack had to admit that Slim Lederle was chiefly responsible for the rescue. Slim had done a masterful job of organizing. Jack began to feel that surging pride of a job well done. It was a feeling that filled his chest with a deep, clean breath.

It let him grin as he unhitched the log-

ging chain from the horns of the steer he had brought up from the wash. Then he was startled by the voice that interrupted his thoughts. So intent on his job had he been, he had paid little attention to the rider who had come up behind him.

"What's the joke?"

Jack twisted about. Nell Bishop was forking a big palomino gelding. Jack noticed the straightness of her back, and the fact that her Stetson had been blown so that it hung behind her, against her shoulders, making a sort of round frame for her face and dark hair. But he did not see the expression because he was avoiding looking into her eyes, afraid of what he might see there.

"No joke," he said. He went to the head of his team. "Was thinking we done a good job today. Was giving Lederle a lot of the credit."

"Generous of you," she said.

"No," Jack said. "Just realistic. If a man does a good job, his job is good whether you like him or hate him. A good job is a good job."

The girl nodded darkly. She said: "Reck-on so, cowboy. Why didn't you come back to headquarters? This is no work for a man with a broken rib."

"I saw something to do here," Jack said.

The girl was silent a moment. Her horse fiddlefooted half way around. Suddenly Nell said: "You know—Slim saved me from bankruptcy after Pa died. Slim's always done a good job. He knows cattle and he isn't afraid to work. Like you said about yourself, he saw something here to do. I owe him a lot more than just his pay."

Jack could no longer avoid looking into the girl's eyes. What she had said hit him right in the center of his heart. His expression gave him away.

"You think that's why I'm marrying him?" the girl laughed. "So does the cook. So does Hank. I reckon Slim might even think it."

Jack asked: "Are they right?"

The girl shrugged her lovely shoulders. Her jet eyes were suddenly veiled.

"Where is Slim?" she asked. "Where is this enemy of yours?"

"Yonderly," Jack said, pointing with a thumb.

"Oh, yes." The girl had spotted Slim. Slim had seen her and was walking up the slope toward her. He was still a long way off. Nell waved and he answered. He was coming very slowly with the forward-drooping trudge of a tired man. The girl said in a low voice: "Someday I'll find out why you two hate each other."

"Reckon you will," Jack said.

Jack jerked at the reins of his nigh horse. "Git," he ordered. The horse started to move.

"Stop—wait!" the girl shouted.

Jack pulled in the team.

CHAPTER 4

The Lost Herd

SLIM looked at him a moment, apparently surprised to find him here since Jack had been keeping out of the way of the ramrod. After that Slim ignored him. A sharp wind was rising, coming from the north. The horses and men alike tended to back into it.

"You better head right back for home," Slim said to Nell. "We ain't through here yet. The prairie's going to freeze up to-night and the footing won't be safe."

"I'll go in a minute," she promised. "But I had to come down to tell you about Longhorn Creek."

"Sonny Boy told me," Slim said.

"I even had to send Hank down there," the girl said. "They've been having trouble. This thaw flooded all the lowlands inside the bend where they were holding the beef they pulled out of the creek. The cattle are standing around on little islands, and—"

"How many boys are down there?" Slim

asked anxiously. "How many cows trapped down there?"

"Only Hank and Pete," the girl said. "Dave broke a leg and the others had to bring him in. They're completely played out. Dave says there are five hundred or so head cooped up there. They'll all be flooded out come morning whether it freezes or not."

"I'll go get them," Slim said. Slim was a man who did not know defeat. "Now, hightail back home, Nell. That's too bad about Dave. He'll need you to look after him. May be more of the boys hurt yet if this stuff freezes. Go on home and keep the fires burning."

"Okay," she said. "See you."

She glanced over at Jack and smiled. She had smiled at him before, but not like this. It was provocative, with a touch of pure devil in it that he did not savvy.

"Be seein' you, too," she added.

She wheeled her horse and trotted north.

As Jack watched her he knew he saw one of the most superb riders he had ever known. Her rhythm in the saddle was one with the horse. He felt again the sudden quickening of heartbeat.

He looked sidewise at Slim Lederle. Slim was watching the girl, too. Slim was holding his breath. A color had come to his cheeks that had not been caused by weather.

"What did she mean by that?" Slim asked in a hoarse whisper.

"I don't know," Jack said. "Maybe she meant she would be seeing me."

Slim Lederle's lips were white. He let his breath go in a long hiss. "Okay, Bright Boy," he said. "I suppose you've been talking to her."

"Not about what you think," Jack said. "I never felt it made interesting conversation for a lady."

Slim silently began to move away.

Jack stopped him. "Sounds like a herding job down on the Longhorn. I'm pretty good at that. Took half a dozen outfits up the trail since I saw you last. Besides I had

a couple good nights' sleep. Maybe I can handle this for you."

Slim stared coldly at him. Slim did not understand this. After a while he raspily cleared his throat. "Thaws like this bring a regular flood to the Longhorn. It'll spread clear over the flats. Ice underneath. Even if there is a freeze tonight, the flood'll keep rising until midnight or thereabouts. There'll be big chunks of ice all around."

Jack shrugged. Slim's cold stare shifted.

"Okay," Slim said.

The men rode to the east forking horses that had been carefully picked from the remuda. The cowboys had brought a portable forge down from the ranch and had shod the dray horses with spiked calks. But the saddle horses still wore their customarily thin shoes on fore hoofs while their hind hoofs were bare. They had little more than hope to keep them from skidding.

Sunset came in a burst of red and yellow fire before they reached the creek. Stars glistened like chips of ice in the sky. The promised freeze was on hand now, brought by the bitter breeze from the north. Chiefly it was noticed in the thin, glass-thick coverings of ice on the pools that cracked underfoot with a brittle singing note. It was not yet thick enough to support a horse's weight, nor was it yet very slippery. That would come later.

The two men did not pause with the ending of daylight but continued on with as fast a trot as the horses would accept. They spoke only once. That was when they came to the high bluff marking the lower end of Longhorn's big bend.

SLIM pointed out the flats below, visible only because of starlight reflected in the ice and water and marked out by two fires the cowboys had built as beacons, one at the lower end of the bend, one at the upper end some mile and a half away. The creek itself was bank-over, outlined by splotches of willow and cottonwood that grew along its steep banks. Here and there black blots

marked bunches of cattle standing dismally on higher ground that the water had not yet reached.

"Under all that water is ice," Slim said. "If you slipped in it you'd be washed downstream. Nobody'd ever know if it was an accident or not."

"I was thinking of that myself," Jack said. "There's even a fair chance your body would never be found."

Their eyes met for a moment. Slim turned away first. He gestured with an arm as he changed the subject:

"We'll go in from the south—drive the cows into the flooded land from their islands and north from there. I brought along some dynamite to encourage them. Maybe we can stampede them. That's the only way we can get them out."

"Reckon you're right," Jack admitted.

He could see it now. If the cattle were left down there on the flats, the rising water would sooner or later drown them. But now that they had temporary refuge they would refuse to budge into the growing flood until it would be too late to save them. Dynamite would force them into the still-shallow water and onward to dry land.

Slim went ahead, turning his horse down a bluff, taking it at an angle, sliding in the soft snow to the bottom. The horses bucked against it. Then they entered the flooded flatlands and the horses absolutely refused to move. Slim beat his mount cruelly with a lariat and spurred it unmercifully until the horse went ahead. Once he was in the water, Jack's horse followed.

The depth of water varied from almost nothing to hock deep to belly deep, and was so bitter cold it was a torture. Now and then blocks of ice and chunks of frozen drifts came slowly by. Jack's mount shied at one of these, slipped and nearly fell. His slick hind feet slithered out from under, lost their purchase. The horse had to sit in the water until Jack stepped from the saddle to help him up again. The water sloshed over Jack's boot-tops.

They could not stop. Jack got aboard and emptied his boots and overshoes as he progressed. His pantlegs began to stiffen where they had been wetted. The horses were warier now, careful of floating ice. They pointed their noses for the lower of the two fires and made a beeline for it.

Here Jack and Slim found old Hank O'Keefe dismally piling on wood. He had built a fire where a roll in the prairie lifted it above the flood. The area was only about the size of a baseball diamond's infield. Hank kept a poker face when he recognized his visitors.

"Welcome to Siberia," Hank said. "Where's the rest of your outfit?"

"We're all," Slim said. "What's happened to the boys?"

"Only was two of us. Pete's keepin' the north fire. The water's gone up a foot in the last hour. In another hour we won't be able to get out of here at all." He took a watch from his pocket and turned it to the fire to look at it. "Wait a second," he said. He waded into the water to the right to a peeled stick that stood above the flood. There were bits of rawhide tied to the stick at regular intervals. "Gone up four inches in the last fifteen minutes," he announced.

He waded out of the water and stood a moment by the fire, warming his hands. He kicked a smouldering brand into the fire.

"I never went beyond the third grade in school," he said, "but I know that four inches in fifteen minutes come to more than a foot a hour. I'm goin' home, gentlemen."

"Go ahead," Slim said angrily.

Old Hank seemed surprised.

"We can't save that herd," Hank argued. "It's too late. We'd have to drag them cows up to high land one at a time by plain strength." Hank was talking with great earnestness. "We won't be able to save ourselves in another few minutes."

Slim Lederle lifted the arm that held the whip. "Get the hell on your way, damn it!" he shouted.

"We'd be damn fools—" Hank started.

Then he licked his lips. He looked to Jack for sympathy and found none there. Hank put a foot in the stirrup of his horse and wearily swung into leather. The old-timer knew he should never have come down here in the first place. This was young man's work.

His horse snorted. He somehow surmised that he was going home. Eagerly he went into the water. When the coldness of it hit him he hesitated. Then he went ahead gingerly.

Hank and the horse gradually faded into the darkness.

Slim Lederle and Jack Boyden were alone. . . .

CHAPTER 5

The Better Man

SLIM brought out his sticks of dynamite. He got down beside the fire and went to work tying these sticks to bits of wood large enough to float them. He fixed caps and fuses, making the fuses short enough so that the explosion would be almost instantaneous.

"You take half of these and I'll take the other half," he told Jack. "We'll sneak up on the cows from the down-stream side. We'll take the bunch on yonder rise first and try to keep them moving so they'll pick up the other bunches on the way to high ground. Okay?"

"Okay," Jack said. There was only a slight chance of this scheme working, but it was the best for the conditions here on the flats. "It's too damn bad you're a skunk," Jack said to Slim. "If you weren't a skunk I'd have to admit you were a smart guy."

"Thanks," Slim said. "Ever hear of smart skunks?" He did not expect an answer. He gathered the bundles of dynamite, divided them in half and gave one bunch to Jack.

"Don't throw any of this until I holler,"

he said. "We'll take along some burning punk from the fire to start these fuses. Maybe this stuff will stampede the cows, and maybe it won't. We got to try it, though, and we got to keep the cows going north if we once get them moving."

Jack said: "Let's go."

Slim was looking at Jack in a very strange way. "You think I'm just plain rotten," he said.

Jack shrugged. "I was in jail. They were going to hang me. You ran out on me and took all our horses as well."

"You shot that tinhorn," Slim said. "I didn't."

"We were in it together," Jack said. "Like we're in this together. When they had me locked up you stole me clean."

"They were looking for me, too," Slim protested. "I figured you wouldn't need those horses after they hanged you. There was nothing I could do about that. When I got a chance to hightail—I hightailed."

Jack spit into the fire. His horse was moving about restlessly. Water had come up in the last minutes to wash the mount's hoofs and make him move ahead.

"There ain't any more to say on that score," Jack said. "We better get Miss Nell's beef out of here."

Slim Lederle was gnawing at his mustache.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe I was a damn fool, Jack, but—uh—well, let's get after these cows."

He did not finish his excuse. He rose to the saddle. Jack followed suit. Jack's feet were cold and soggy in their wet boots. Leaning down to the fire, he picked up a flaming stick. This would soon burn out, but it might last to help get the first bunch of steers on the move. He jabbed his mount with spurs, and the horse was so startled he jumped into the icy water before he had time to think of what he was doing. Immediately he fought back.

Slim was beside him. The two big horses went on with stubborn reluctance. On their

snowy island the cattle bellowed dismally, their faces all turned toward the riders who approached with burning brands reflecting in the black water. The cows were annoyed and frightened. They were likely to do anything.

"Let go with the first one," Slim ordered.

Jack touched wick to burning wood. The wick sputtered meanly. He heaved the grenade and saw it fall short of the island. Miraculously the fuse was not extinguished. Suddenly the whole thing let go with a terrific blast. Water spouted into the air and a chunk of wood hummed past Jack's ears. The cows stared stupidly at the source of the great racket. A moment later Slim's grenade blew up. Jack spurred his frightened horse ahead. He fired his sixshooter into the air and howled like a Comanche.

The cattle closest to this racket decided the time had come when they must leave this fearsome place. They turned tail and ran with a thunderous bellow. The more reluctant beeves up yonder in the darkness at the edge of the freezing water were pushed off the island into knee-deep water. They spotted more of their kind far ahead in the night and aimed their noses in that direction, plowing through the water, churning it into choppy waves of white foam.

Behind them Slim and Jack gave them no chance to hesitate. When the leaders reached the next island, the cowboys set off more dynamite bombs and charged in screaming, shooting. By now both men were soaking wet. Jack hardly noticed it. The exhilaration of battle buried all fatigue for the moment, all pain and sense of freezing wind slicing down the valley of the creek.

Once Jack glanced behind. The fire that had been burning to the rear had gone out, washed away by rising water that now completely covered the island where they had come across old Hank O'Keefe. Now

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

the fire to the north of the big bend was growing as they approached it. A sudden spurt of sparks indicated that the cowboy tending it was still there and had thrown on more wood. It was like a lighthouse.

They flushed their third and apparently last bunch of cattle and had the whole lot swimming and struggling north in terror, heading for solid land. They were down to their last stick of dynamite apiece, and were almost out of cartridges. But they were within sight of success. They had saved the herd. . . .

Then Slim spurred across to the right at a slant, yelling at Jack. Jack thought Slim was after him now. Then Slim turned north and Jack got it. The leaders of the herd had swerved from their path. It was not much, but it was enough to take them to the right of the beacon fire where they would all be lost in the upper arc of the big bend of Longhorn Creek.

Somehow Slim managed to cut around behind them. He heaved his last stick of dynamite. Its geyser was a million shining diamonds against the bonfire. When it settled, the herd had changed its course. Jack heaved his last charge. The cattle took on the speed of sheer terror and headed straight for the high country. Once they reached it they would keep running until they were dry and warm.

Jack grinned wearily. He looked around for Slim. Slim seemed to have gotten into trouble. In his last effort to turn the herd, he had ridden too far to the east, over the invisible bank of the stream into the river itself. He was clinging to the horn of his saddle and paddling with his free hand while the horse swam frantically downstream just beyond the willows. Even as Jack hesitated, watching Slim, the man who had been tending the upper fire shouted something into the darkness.

Jack glanced back, saw the cowboy lift into the saddle of his waiting horse. A

(Please continue on page 104)

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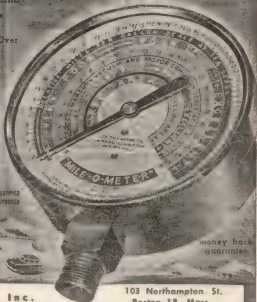


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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 102)

moment later the fire began to spitter and a great column of steam hissed skyward. The flood was reaching the last bit of land in the flats. The cowboy who had been watching the beacon was following in the wake of the herd. Down here the flats were wide and dark and cold and lonely.

JACK did not really think about this. His luck that had formerly been so bad had carried him through this day. It had dunked Slim in the creek from which he was now trying to extricate himself. It had left Jack on land, not the best of land since it was covered with three to four feet of water, but land nevertheless. Jack's luck had put into his hands the opportunity he had so long dreamed about of getting even with Slim Lederle.

He reined his horse toward the creek where he had last seen Slim. The animal bucked and kicked. A big chunk of ice swirled by, rubbing against Jack's leg. The horse skittered off and Jack realized for the first time that the water was reaching for the swellfork of his saddle. Jack's weight alone kept the horse's hoofs on the ground.

Then he spotted Slim yonder between a couple of willows, fighting frantically to get out of the current of the river. He angled down, moving slowly as a man in a dream. He shook out his rope, found that it was frozen solid. He beat it against the cante until it regained some flexibility, then let his loop fly.

He did not see where it landed, for his already terrified horse began to buck again and slipped on the ice below. The bitter water grabbed at Jack like a frozen fist. It choked the wind in his lungs and bit at his skin. In the first awful spasm of it he lost his seat and was thrown into the swirl. Miraculously he kept his grip on the reins.

(Please continue on page 106)

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 104)

When he struggled to the surface he still had a horse at his disposal and when he could see again he saw that Slim's horse with no rider was swimming straight for the bluffs.

Jack had pulled himself into leather before he discovered he had caught a fish. Without thinking about it, old habit had caused him to tie his rope to the horn before he made his loop. It was still tied, and at the other end was Slim Lederle.

It gave Jack a strange, ugly lift. He had not lost his chance at revenge, after all.

Slowly he reeled in the rope. Meanwhile his horse, on his own accord, had started north, searching for land. Slim approached, splashing oddly. The rope was over his wrist and sometimes it dragged him under. At other times it let him surface for a breath. Then he was up alongside Jack like a huge shark ready for the gaff. He had lost his hat. His eyes were wild, and there was ice on his mustache.

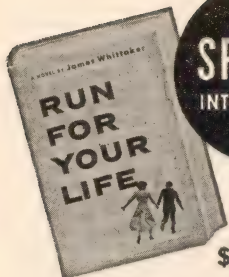
"Why'd you come after me?" he asked.

"We got an engagement," Jack said. "Remember? Chances are nobody'd find a body down there. If they did they wouldn't know how that man had died."

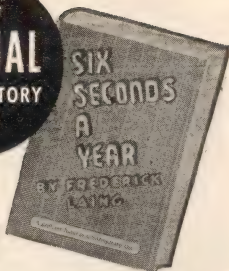
The horse had reached the upper end of the bend and was heroically dragging himself and his double burden onto the now flooded rise where the fire had been. Hanging on alongside the saddle, Slim felt ground underfoot. Slim shook off the rope around his wrist. Clinging with left hand to the cantle of Jack's saddle, he stumbled up onto the rise.

"You don't know how I've hated myself," he said. "I work until I'm ready to drop. Remember the old days—never worked at all, hardly. But now I got to work—to forget. To remember, too, I reckon."

(Please continue on page 108)



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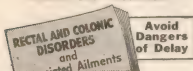
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 106)

The horse was climbing out onto shallower water. Jack's feet felt heavy in the stirrups now that they were free of buoyancy. Slim was only thigh deep now. The will for revenge had burned mighty low in Jack. He had saved Slim's life once tonight—a life Slim had almost lost doing a gallant piece of work for Nell Bishop. It just did not make sense to try and kill a man after saving him.

"Let's try and forget it," Jack said.

Slim saw a stick floating by, about the size of a baseball bat, hissing faintly. It was the last of the fire that had burned on this mound and was now being floated off by the rising flood. It presented Slim with something more concrete than talk. He reached for it. He swung it, using both hands, aiming it for the back of Jack's head.

Jack saw it coming but could not get away from it. He tumbled forward and down, taking the blow on the shoulders after the peak of its power. It dragged him around, downward, and drove him up against Slim. Between the weight of Jack and the circular pull of the club, Slim was whirled around and thrown off his feet. He managed however to twist about so that he ended up on top of Jack in the icy water. He shoved a knee into Jack's face, holding him down there under the frozen black surface.

Jack could get no traction on the slippery, icy grass. He rolled his face sidewise so Slim's knee slipped off. Then he jabbed up with his own knee and felt it strike into Slim's stomach. A second later he surfaced, gasping, biting for air.

Slim had been thrown to one side, but had gotten to his feet and was coming in at a crouch. Jack backed up. He let Slim close in slightly and then swung a fist. The sting of knuckles against Slim's cheekbone was a pleasant sensation. But

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it did not stop Slim. Slim chopped down at Jack's left ear and knocked him off balance, dumping him into the water again.

When he came up Slim was swinging another club at his head. Jack butted in. He butted hard, and kept on butting, driving Slim back in water that dragged at his legs like glue. He butted and punched short punches to the belly. He ignored the beating of that club on his back until Slim's spurs caught in some underwater weeds and Slim tumbled backward. Then Jack beat him down into the water and turned away.

HE FOUND his horse, waiting on the highest ground, standing in hock-deep water, ready for fate to take him. Jack could not get into the saddle. There was no strength left in his muscles sufficient to pull him that high. For seconds he leaned against his mount, sucking in short breaths, while the cold wind gnawed at him. He saw something move in the flood below him. He stumbled toward it.

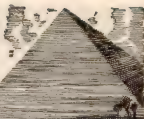
Jack began to laugh. There was Slim. Jack wondered what Nell Bishop would think of this. He laughed at what Slim would think of it if that hombre was still capable of thinking. As he laughed, Slim, who had propped himself up on his club, slowly slid forward, face down into the water. Slim had given out.

Jack got him by the collar. He could barely hold Slim's face above water. He pulled him along that way until they reached the horse. He remembered something Slim had said after the merciless beating in the cookshack, after Slim had kicked in his ribs.

"If he can't sit a horse," Slim had said, "tie him on it. Get rid of him."

Jack hoisted Slim to his feet. He draped Slim's arms over the saddle and tied him down. Then he got in front of the horse and led him into the water. He went into this terribly cold water and

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

after a while he was out of it again though he had no memory of wading through it.

He knew he was out of the water and on high ground by the lack of drag on his feet and the bite of cold that was worse than the water. He tried to cheer and the wind snatched away his voice.

He laughed, feeling the heat of tears on his cheeks. Then he fell on his face. He got up again and pulled Slim down to the ground and slapped him until Slim opened his eyes.

"Come on, boy," he said. "We got to get going. We got to get moving. We got to walk, Slim, or freeze."

Slim did not say anything. His eyes rolled queerly. The horse sniffed at Jack, then trotted off. Jack got Slim on his feet, somehow. Half holding him up, half dragging him, they stumbled on toward the Muleshoe. They went on while their clothing froze like armor and their hair became a helmet. They were still stumbling forlornly onward when a rescue crew found them. Old Hank O'Keefe and Nell Bishop with blankets and a jug of hot whiskey. . . .

Jack sat by the fire in the living room of the Muleshoe ranch house. He was still cold. His teeth chattered though he now wore dry clothing and was wrapped in a heavy blanket and bearskin robe. The hot toddies had not seemed to help much, either. They only warmed his stomach, leaving the rest of him cold. On the other side of the hearth Nell Bishop sat on a little rawhide and ironwood stool watching him. She was keeping him supplied with toddies.

"You haven't told me why you hate Slim so," she said. "You hate him but you brought him back. Nobody thought you'd both come back. You know, I would never have let you go down there with him if I had known about it."

"You haven't told me why you are going to marry him," Jack countered. "You

COFFINS FREE

hate him, too. But you're still going to marry him."

She poked at the fire, studied the pattern of sparks shooting up the chimney.

"I'm not going to marry him," she said. Her voice was very small, clear like a tiny silver sleigh bell. "I changed my mind about that. Matter of fact, I'm not at all sure I ever had my mind made up. It was—well, I owed him a lot. A girl has to marry some day, and he was the biggest man I had ever known. Even you said he stuck to his job down there on the flats when most men would have quit."

"Sure," Jack said. He stared at the fire, then back at the girl. He did not tell her that Slim had admitted his drive came from a bad conscience. He was ready now to forgive Slim—to forget. They were quits. "You said *was*."

There was nervousness in the girl's brief laugh.

"Was!" she emphasized it. "When I saw what he had done to your ribs with his heel when you were down, it made him shrink up a bit. And then—I met a bigger man tonight." The unsteady quality of her laugh vibrated through her again. The fire was back in her dark eyes. "Or am I being presumptuous in thinking that meeting this bigger man will make any difference in my life? Maybe he is too big for me."

"Could be, ma'am," Jack bowed to her. His smile warmed up slowly. "I sort of reckon not, though. If the feller you're talking about is in this room, he ain't very much aware of size. He just does the job he's got to do."

"So do I!" Nell said.

She came over to him. He kissed her hand. Then he stood and kissed her on the mouth. She put her arms around his neck to cling to him. Jack stopped shivering.

THE END



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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 26)

Curro Burro had shot Carlos Kemp too.

The two huge bulks swayed and went down heavily. Carlos and Barnabas Kemp were both dead when their bodies crashed there on the ground beside the Bitter Springs Well.

Curro Burro stood there, his smoking six-shooter in his hand.

"Saddle your horse, friend," Curro Burro said softly. "You should reach the border by daybreak. You will find the woman you love and the woman who loves you, waiting for you."

"But you, Curro Burro? What of you, compadre?"

"I must pick up the two loose horses and the pack mule loaded with contraband. I have my official report to turn in to the proper Mexican authorities, and I shall also write my report to your Arizona Ranger captain. I shall at the same time hand in my resignation as Chief of the Secret Police of the Republic of Mexico.

"You, my friend, shall ride with the woman you love to the old mission. You shall find me there. It is my wish that you two be married there. You must grant that favor to Curro Burro, who shall spend the rest of his life there. Perhaps, and that is my one hopeful prayer, the padres of the Order of St. Francis will someday, when I have completed my many months of holy retreat and prayers of atonement, allow me to wear the brown robe of their holy order."

As Rock Tucker rode away in the moonlight, he could hear the strumming of a guitar. He heard the song, a song that Curro Burro sang to a girl named Magdalena.

Rock Tucker looked back over his shoulder. He could see the dwarfed Mexican standing hatless, his face lifted skyward. And slowly the wild burros came to stand there surrounding the man called Curro Burro.

THE END

FAREWELL TO THE STAR

(Continued from page 35)

hit the bend in the road that led down to the willow-shaded river bank. And he could see it wasn't any picnic that hadn't been planned. He saw that as soon as he saw the banner they'd painted that said *Marshal MacLain Testimonial Picnic* in big red letters and was stretched along a plank that rested on two of Alf Mattson's apple barrels.

MacLain sat straight on the buckboard, looking down at them, his jaw set tight, holding himself in. And after they'd done their shooting they gathered together in a hard knot around the buckboard, smiling up at him, waiting for him to say what he would.

MacLain was afraid he couldn't do it. He was afraid he couldn't talk to these people without showing what he felt—not to Alf or Guy Stacey or Doc or Art Rushton. So he sat there, rigid, his eyes dimmed, and it wasn't until Pam punched him with her elbow that he came to his senses. He turned to her, then, and let her see that he needed help, and she smiled and nodded encouragement.

"Just tell them how you feel, Dad," she said. "This was their idea. They'll understand."

So MacLain stiffened and stood there on the buckboard and told them how he felt. He said he deemed it an honor to have been the marshal of Peacepipe and that he wanted them to know he was grateful to them for making him that man. Then, because he didn't want to draw it out, he told them to light into the food and to have a good time, and he'd join them in a minute.

He turned, then, and blew his nose, and if it was loud enough for the ones in back to hear and if the ones in front could see why he blew, why, that was all right too. Because he knew, then, that they all understood.



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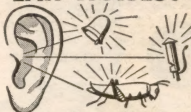
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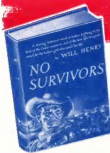
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